



The Rivals: Chris Evert vs. Martina Navratilova Their Epic Duels and Extraordinary Friendship

Johnette Howard

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In the annals of sports, no individual rivalry matches the intensity, longevity, and emotional resonance of the one between two extraordinary women: Chris Evert and Martina Navratilova.

Over sixteen years, Evert and Navratilova met on the tennis court a record eighty times—sixty times in finals. At their first match in Akron, Ohio, in 1973, Chris was an eighteen-year-old star and Martina, two years her junior, was an unknown Czech making her first trip to the United States. It would be two years before Martina finally beat Chris, and another year—after Navratilova had dropped twenty pounds and improved her game—before Evert publicly betrayed her first hint of concern. By then, the women were already friends and sometimes doubles partners, and the colorful story that would captivate the world was under way.

The Rivals is the first book to examine the intertwined journey of these legendary champions, based on extensive interviews with each. Taking readers on and off the courts with vivid, never-before-published material, award-winning sportswriter Johnette Howard shows how Evert and Navratilova came of age during the rambunctious golden age of tennis in the 1970s, and how—together—they redefined women's athletics during a time of volcanic change in sports and society. Their epic careers unfolded against the backdrop of the fight for Title IX, the gay rights movement, the women's movement and the fall of the iron curtain. Howard draws entertaining, intimate, and myth-shattering portraits of Evert and Navratilova, describing the personal migrations each woman made, and showing how enmeshed their lives became.

Navratilova and Evert's ability to forge and maintain a friendship during sixteen years of often-cutthroat competition has always provoked wonder and admiration. They were a study in contrasts, a collision of politics and style and looks. Chris was the crowd darling while Martina, her greatest foil, was often cast as the villain. Chris was the imperturbable champion who proved toughness and femininity weren't mutually exclusive; Martina was portrayed as both emotionally fragile and some fearsome Amazon. Chris's off-court life was presumed to be bedrock solid, the stuff of Main Street America; Martina's was derided as outrageous and sometimes chaotic, even during her invincible years. Yet, through it all, the two remained friends who lifted each other to heights that each says she couldn't have reached without the other.

Women's tennis now is more popular than ever, thanks in large part to the trailblazing of Evert and Navratilova. A rivalry like theirs, filled with so many grace notes, is unique in sports history.

The Rivals: Chris Evert vs. Martina Navratilova Their Epic Duels and Extraordinary Friendship Details

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Katie says

Most authors struggle to pack the professional, public, and private threads of one person's life into one book in a manner that is both complete and flows on at least a bit of literary narrative. Howard manages to weave together these threads in an extremely readable manner not just for Evert and Navratilova, but she also includes large swaths of Billie Jean King's professional and public life as well as the origin story of the Women's Tennis Association and some critical milestones of civil rights. So that's reason enough to read this. If you happen to also like tennis or maybe just recall when Chrissie and Martina (and even Billie Jean) made headline news (not just for sports), then you will like this front row/in the friends' box view of how these amazing athletes and interesting women developed (with help), maintained (with more help), and successfully moved beyond (with well-earned independence, at last) their world beating tennis careers. I enjoyed pondering my recollections/impressions of each person in comparison to what this book reveals/emphasizes. For example, my suspicions that Chrissie was not all sweetness and light was confirmed & I was fascinated by the specific details of the night Martina defected. But it was the larger stage that was most interesting. Would either have been as good as she became without the other? Probably not. And this is a grand slam look at why.

Linda Smatzny says

The book covers the background of both Chris Evert and Martina Navratilova and then follows their careers. The book is older so the last information about both is out of date. The book was an easy read.

David says

Loved it! I recently saw the Evert/Navratilova "30 for 30" documentary by ESPN and really enjoyed that as well. Having seen it, though, I almost opted to skip this book. After all, I figured I heard their story through the doc. But, I'm glad I did read it. Of course, it is much deeper and has much more info that a 60 minute television show could. You get to hear from many other players including Billie Jean King, who has a more prominent role in the book than most of the others. And it is entertaining from start to finish. The book is kind of like a mini-biography of each woman while describing their rivalry, which was perfect for me. There was never a time when I was bored. Full biographies of Navratilova and Evert are probably very good, too, but there tends to be sections of most biographies in general that are a little uninteresting here and there depending on your viewpoint. Here, the author just had time for the most important things about Evert and Navratilova, otherwise the book would have been a monster! Their stories switched back and forth and came together very nicely. Highly recommended! Brett...check it out! :-)

mstan says

I've always enjoyed watching tennis. My parents introduced me to this genteel sport when I was a kid, and I have fond memories of graceful athletes lobbing balls over a net.

Martina Navratilova and Chris Evert were the biggest female tennis stars when I first became conscious of tennis, but I never really knew them well (I was just 8 or 9 I think!). This book is more a biography of both women than it is an account of their rivalry. It highlights some interesting facts about athleticism and the power of competition, which I enjoyed, but mixed with these observations is a lot of socio-political backdrop, and the dismantling of the Ice Queen vs. Lesbian Ex-Czech images that the respective tennis players were given, and these latter two aspects, I found a little wearying at times.

I think this is my problem with reading non-fiction - that it more easily slips into telling you what to think than fiction does...

Jonathan says

Recommend by Sports Illustrated's tennis scribe, a really good sports author in his own right (Venus Envy, Strokes of Genius, and the forthcoming Sportscasting, sort of Freakonomics for sports). It's a captivating story that may not even require much, as these two played such inspired tennis against each other. What an era! Navratilova, the bigger, stronger, Czech immigrant, a lesbian whose MO was to crash the net on court, and Evert, the fragile looking but mentally steely America's sweetheart with the vicious backhand down the line to pass her opponent. The styles and personalities were conflicting, and yet they played each other *EIGHTY* times, more than any other rivals in sports, ever. Ali and Frazier boxed maybe 3 times. There was a great "30 on 30" documentary featuring these two women catching up in present day on their playing days against each other too; it was on ESPN.

Rachel C. says

I'm a pretty big tennis fan now, but I wasn't born yet / didn't follow tennis for the bulk of the time period this book focuses on. I did have the experience of seeing Martina Navratilova at the US Open, playing doubles with Bob Bryan. She was almost fifty (!) at the time, and they won the title. I remember thinking, "Boy, she must really love tennis." (By comparison, Andre Agassi was considered an old man when he retired at 36.)

This book covers a lot of ground, everything from the biographical details of the two ladies and the technical aspects to their tennis games, to the early history of the women's tour, to the political climate of communist Czechoslovakia. I'd recommend it any fellow tennis lover, but it will probably have more resonance if you watched Evert and Navratilova play when they were in their prime.

Kirsti says

Surprising, funny, sad, compulsively readable. When you read the words "I lived most of my life in fear," you'd think that Martina Navratilova said them, right? After all, she was a closeted lesbian who defected

from a Communist country. Nope, Chris Evert said them. Most people who knew Navratilova thought she wasn't afraid *enough*.

Some other quotes from this remarkable book:

"I'm still tired from the '70s." --Billie Jean King, explaining why she likes to sleep late

"People always thought I was angry. I wasn't. I was determined." --BJK again

"Men are playing tennis for a living now. They don't want to give up money just for girls to play . . . Why should we have to split our money with them?" --Arthur Ashe

"You could be the best player ever--I mean in the history of the game. God has given you this extraordinary talent. . . . But if you don't work hard you are not going to make it." --BJK to Navratilova

"Don't say a word to your mother. Just go. If you're going to do it, just stay there. No matter what we say, don't let us talk you into coming back. We may have a gun to our head when we talk with you on the phone."
--Navratilova's stepfather, discussing the possibility of the 18-year-old defecting to the United States

"Man is still the breadwinner no matter what the women's libbers say." --Evert

"I still thought of women athletes as freaks, and I used to hate myself, thinking I must not be a whole woman." --Evert

"I'm not a machine." --Evert, sobbing uncontrollably after failing to defend her Wimbledon title

"Can you help me?" --Evert after another match; her hands had cramped around the racquet, leaving her unable to let it go

"I think it's because my parents just never made a big deal about that sort of thing. They never said a bad word about gay people, not even when I first began playing the tennis tour. My mother treated everyone the same, and so I did too." --Evert, describing her progressive views about homosexuality despite growing up in a conservative Catholic family

"I really felt that America was the land of opportunity, the land of dreams, the land where you can be who you are and not have to make any apologies." --Navratilova

"In her wildest imaginings, Martina couldn't believe that people would mistreat her because she was a lesbian. That was un-American in her mind." --Rita Mae Brown

"Who are we to knock it if someone is gay? . . . We're in no position to judge right and wrong in someone else's life." --Evert, in an editorial in *World Tennis* magazine, 1981

"I hate being called a homosexual. I don't feel homosexual." --BJK in *People* magazine, 1981

"If we want others to give us respect, we must first be willing to give ourselves respect. We must be proud of who we are. And we cannot do that if we hide." --Navratilova at the gay and lesbian rights march on Washington, 1993

"[Evert is] the perfect image of a lady who happens to be a great tennis player. Whereas I was an athlete who happens to be a woman." --Navratilova

"The ball doesn't know how old I am." --Navratilova in 2000

"I hope when I'm gone somebody will say that I mattered. That's important to me." --Navratilova

"No matter how catty we get with each other in private or in public, I still have a closeness with [Evert] that I will never have with another human being because of what we went through together, on and off the court." -Navratilova

Heather says

I recommend this book to anyone curious about trailblazing women athletes. It was amazing to me that as recently as the 1970s that strong women athletes were considered by many to be "unnatural". The book also touched on the sad reality that we place famous folks in a labeled box, so we believe that we can judge them or love them based on information fed to us by the media. All in all pretty interesting stuff.

Lynne says

Loved it, having spent time living through this famous dueling pairs matches. What I especially liked about the book was the way it illustrated that rivals could be friends. They spent time in each other's homes and lived through their romantic trials and successes. These two women were class acts with courteous behavior (especially on the part of Chris Evert) on the court and off. What a story about civility and mutual support. I wish we had more examples of this today.

Craig says

This book is fun for the juicy details about the Woman's tour in the 70s. I can't get the image of Chris and Martina going on a double date with Desi Arnaz Jr. and Dino Martin. I just wish they had pictures from the night.

Joyce says

Howard is a fine writer. As someone with little interest in tennis, I still found it a page-turner. These two women are amazing, and I believe, as Howard certainly does, that they made each other better, elevating the sport at the same time. Howard includes the earliest history of the women's movement and women in sport, including a fine piece on Billie Jean King. Men and women in our group rated this a 9 out 10 for a sports book, and would highly recommend it to all ages for its recognition of historical events (Martina's defection from Prague could be a story in itself!), and social issues such as civil rights for women and homosexuals.

All this and a couple of dishy details for the fiction lover.... Who knew that Rita Mae Brown was once Martina's partner and that Martina has co-authored three mysteries?!

Terre Max says

I was a big fan of Chris Evert and Martina back in the day. I loved watching their competitions. Enjoyed this book.

Susan says

I was just talking with one of my regular customers at work about tennis biographies when I remembered this one.

Growing up in the 70's & 80's, my favourite player was Chrissie Evert. Martina was alright, but Chrissie was the one for me! All those classic Grand Slam matches, usually finals or semi-finals, between the two, when this young Aussie fan would stay up late into the night hoping for an Evert victory. I was never too disappointed when Martina won because they both knew how to put on show!

This book covers the very early days in their careers, when Chris was already a champion but Martina was an up and coming player from Czechoslovakia. I was too young at this point to understand all about the decision for Martina to defect to the USA but from what I remember from this book, Chris was quite a support throughout this time.

I'll have to dig this one out and have another read but I do know that this was a fascinating read about these two remarkable champs. As the title suggests, they were fierce rivals on court but friends off it, a friendship which I believe has only grown in the years since their retirements.

I still remember the day I scored a Chris Evert autograph at the Australian Open, one of the last on the grass courts of Kooyong. I was a little bit starstruck but still remembered my manners as I politely asked if I could have an autograph after gushing something like "you're my favourite Chrissie!". I had to wait for another fifteen or so years to score Martina's, at an outside court at Melbourne's tennis centre.

Alisa says

Great book! Goes beyond their epic sports rivalry and personal friendship, but also exposes the development of women's professional tennis at the forefront of challenging stereotypes about women athletes and women's pro sports generally. Both of these extraordinary women led lives very different from each other, and each had distinct challenges which plagued them during the course of their careers. Their on-court duels drove each of them behind the scenes, and provided the sport spectator with memorable spectacle. Thoroughly researched, very well written, this story was a page turner. I walked away feeling like I know so much more about each of these women personally, as well as an appreciation for their contribution to their craft and the progress towards equality in all phases of life.

I don't recall whatever possessed me to pick up this book or where I got it. I love a good spectator sport but have barely paid much attention to tennis - except for lessons in junior high school I never played. Even if you are not a fan of the sport, there is so much more in this book that is engaging and thought provoking.

Great book.

Briley says

This book taught me so much about diversity, commonalities and succeeding when it didn't seem possible. I also learned about positive competitiveness and the will to never give up or improve.
