

GAME CHANGERS

HOW TENNIS ROYALTY BILLIE JEAN KING AND ILANA KLOSS ARE TAKING THEIR FIGHT FOR EQUALITY BEYOND THE COURT

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10-min read

Leadership

Billie Jean King and Ilana Kloss were champions on the tennis court, but it's what this powerhouse couple have done off it that has fostered real change for women in business.

Billie Jean King and Ilana Kloss agree there's a simple reason why their decades-long personal and professional partnership works.

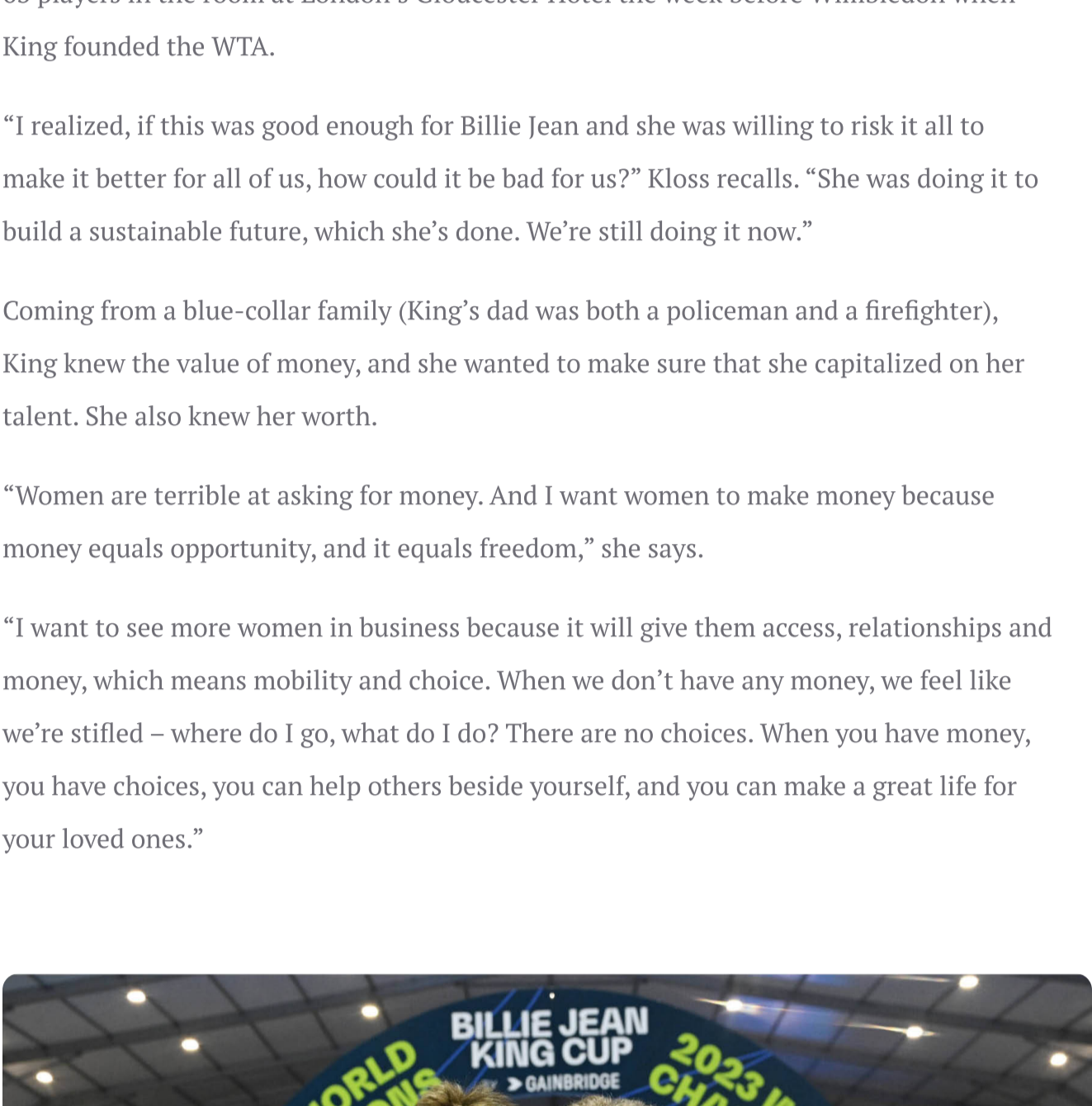
"Billie is the dreamer and I'm the builder. She's always thinking about how to make things better and I tend to rein us back in, which sometimes creates a few issues," Kloss says with a laugh, speaking from the couple's New York home.

"I dream big, and Ilana brings me back down to reality," King adds wryly. "So we're a good team."

A lifelong advocate for gender equality and social justice, King changed the course of women's tennis when in 1973, she founded the Women's Tennis Association (WTA), which paved the way for women's tennis, and women's sport in general, to grow.

"I've always been very driven. And when I got into tennis, it was amateur and I thought, this is baloney because we're the best players in the world and we're called amateurs.

"Amateur to me means it's a hobby and if you're the best in the world, you're a pro – you're good. So that irritated me, no end," says King, a 39-time Grand Slam winner who won 12 singles titles, including six at Wimbledon, 16 doubles titles and 11 mixed doubles trophies.



Billie Jean Moffitt (later King) plays Brazilian tennis player Maria Bueno in the semifinals of the Women's Singles during the 1965 Wimbledon Championships

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In 1968, after winning the first open Wimbledon, King looked at her winner's check and saw that it was for £750 (US\$949), instead of the £2,000 (US\$2,532) that Australian champion Rod Laver would net for winning the men's title.

"I thought, 'Wow, that's a pretty big difference,'" King says.

Right then, she knew she had to change the sport.

"I had the vision that it should be pro."

EYE ON THE BALL

Kloss, who had been a ball girl for King in South Africa as an 11-year-old, was among the 63 players in the room at London's Gloucester Hotel the week before Wimbledon when King founded the WTA.

"I realized, if this was good enough for Billie Jean and she was willing to risk it all to make it better for all of us, how could it be bad for us?" Kloss recalls. "She was doing it to build a sustainable future, which she's done. We're still doing it now."

Coming from a blue-collar family (King's dad was both a policeman and a firefighter), King knew the value of money, and she wanted to make sure that she capitalized on her talent. She also knew her worth.

"Women are terrible at asking for money. And I want women to make money because money equals opportunity, and it equals freedom," she says.

"I want to see more women in business because it will give them access, relationships and money, which means mobility and choice. When we don't have any money, we feel like we're stifled – where do I go, what do I do? There are no choices. When you have money, you have choices, you can help others beside yourself, and you can make a great life for your loved ones."



Kloss and King at the 2023 Billie Jean King Cup Finals, Seville Final

"Billie is the dreamer and I'm the builder. She's always thinking about how to make things better and I tend to rein us back in."

– Ilana Kloss

King's business career started early while she was still playing; she owned a series of tournaments and co-founded World TeamTennis, and launched *womenSports* magazine.

"A lot of athletes, when they retire, don't know what to do. I knew exactly what I was going to do – I was going into business," she says.

In 1974, King founded the Women's Sports Foundation, which celebrates its 50th birthday this year. A nonprofit focused on women's involvement in sports, the foundation was born out of her childhood frustration that because she was a girl, sport wasn't readily available to her.

In 1975, at the age of 29, she famously won the 'Battle of the Sexes' tennis match against the 55-year-old Bobby Riggs, believing that beating her male counterpart was important both for women's tennis and for the women's liberation movement as a whole.

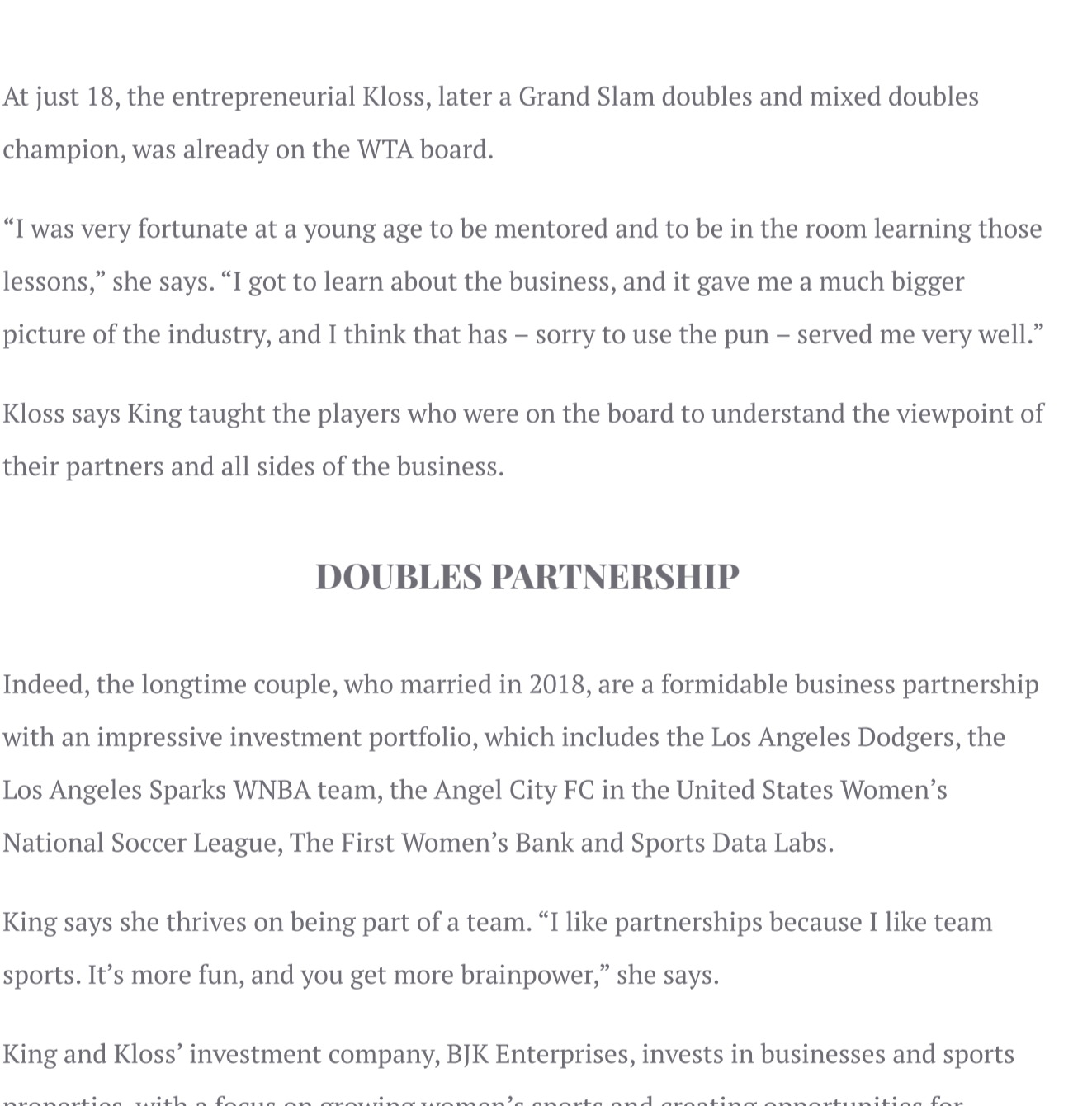
"I realized that when I was nine years old, when I went to watch a Dodgers baseball game. My heart sank that day and I was so upset because I knew I'd never play baseball because I was a girl," she says.

EARLY STRUGGLES

Growing up in California's Long Beach, the sports-mad King could only watch on as her younger brother, Randy, played in junior baseball leagues. Randy Moffitt would go on to play in America's Major League Baseball for 12 years, suiting up for the San Francisco Giants, Houston Astros and the Toronto Blue Jays during his career.

"There was nothing for girls in sport as far as the future – there was no place to go for me. Everything the guys could do, I couldn't do it because I was a girl. We didn't have anything – grassroots or otherwise," King remembers.

"There was nothing for women in those days and I don't think people realize now how bad it was, but out of frustration comes possibility, and you learn how to solve problems."



King talks with the media prior to playing a tennis match called 'Battle of the Sexes' in 1973

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– Billie Jean King

As a young tennis professional, Kloss was figuring out her own problems: namely how to afford to become a full-time tennis player when she came from South Africa, which was isolated from the major tournaments that were most often held in the United States and Europe.

"Coming from a country far away, being cognizant of getting to the other side of the world, where was I going to stay, how do I manage my money and costs?" Kloss recalls.

"And my dad was in sales; he never had a base salary, and everything he earned was based on commission. But I think that experience of having to figure out how to travel all over the world – and survive – helped me."



Kloss in her playing career at Wimbledon

At just 18, the entrepreneurial Kloss, later a Grand Slam doubles and mixed doubles champion, was already on the WTA board.

"I was very fortunate at a young age to be mentored and to be in the room learning those lessons," she says. "I got to learn about the business, and it gave me a much bigger picture of the industry, and I think that has – sorry to use the pun – served me very well."

Kloss says King taught the players who were on the board to understand the viewpoint of their partners and all sides of the business.

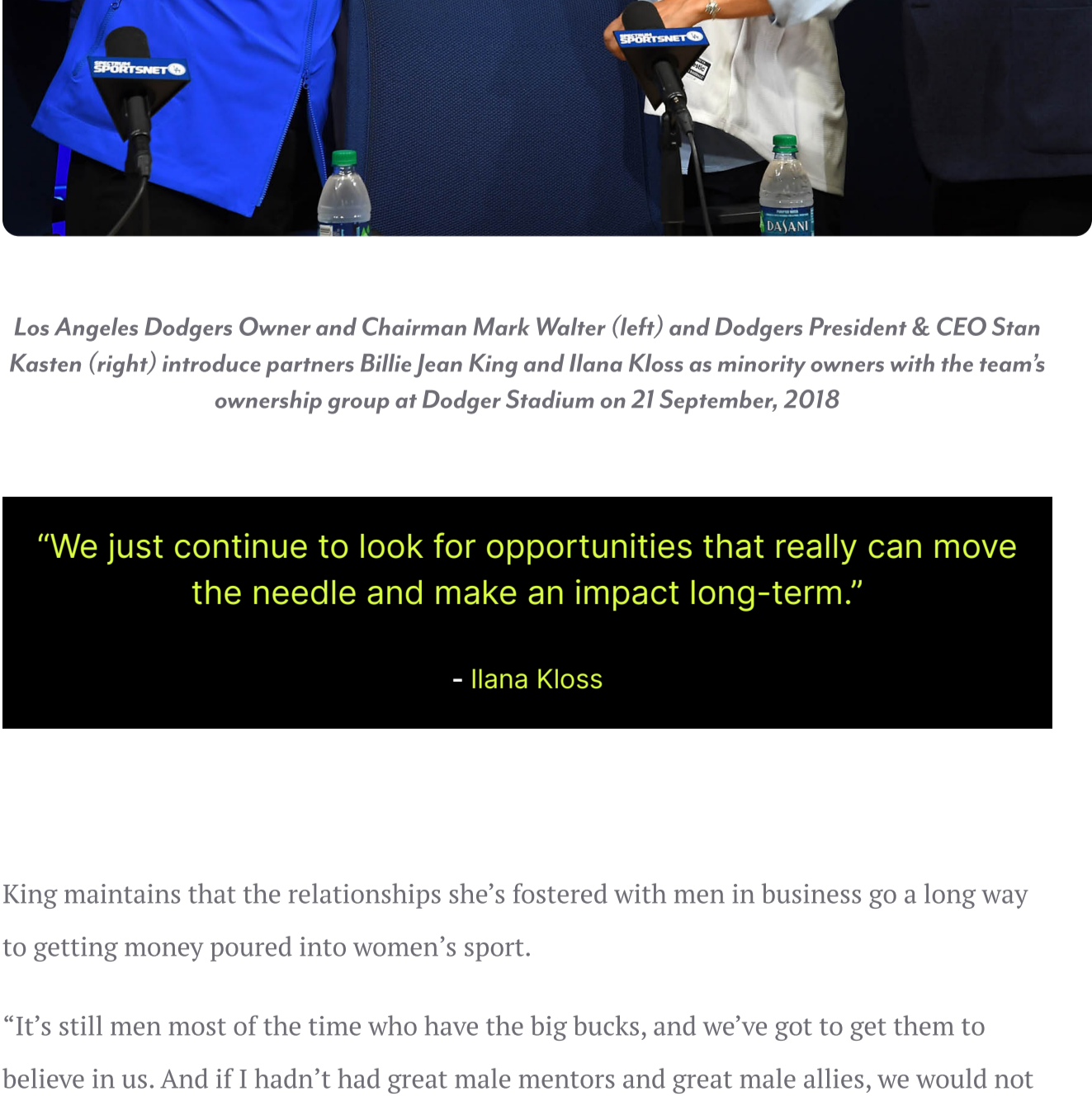
DOUBLES PARTNERSHIP

Indeed, the longtime couple, who married in 2018, are a formidable business partnership with an impressive investment portfolio, which includes the Los Angeles Dodgers, the Los Angeles Sparks WNBA team, the Angel City FC in the United States Women's National Soccer League, The First Women's Bank and Sports Data Labs.

King says she thrives on being part of a team. "I like partnerships because I like team sports. It's more fun, and you get more brainpower," she says.

King and Kloss' investment company, BJK Enterprises, invests in businesses and sports properties, with a focus on growing women's sports and creating opportunities for underrepresented communities in sport.

"If we look at the business, we just continue to look for opportunities that really can move the needle and make an impact long-term," Kloss adds.



Los Angeles Dodgers Owner and Chairman Mark Walter (left) and Dodgers President & CEO Stan Kasten (right) introduce partners Billie Jean King and Ilana Kloss as minority owners with the team's ownership group at Dodger Stadium on 21 September, 2018

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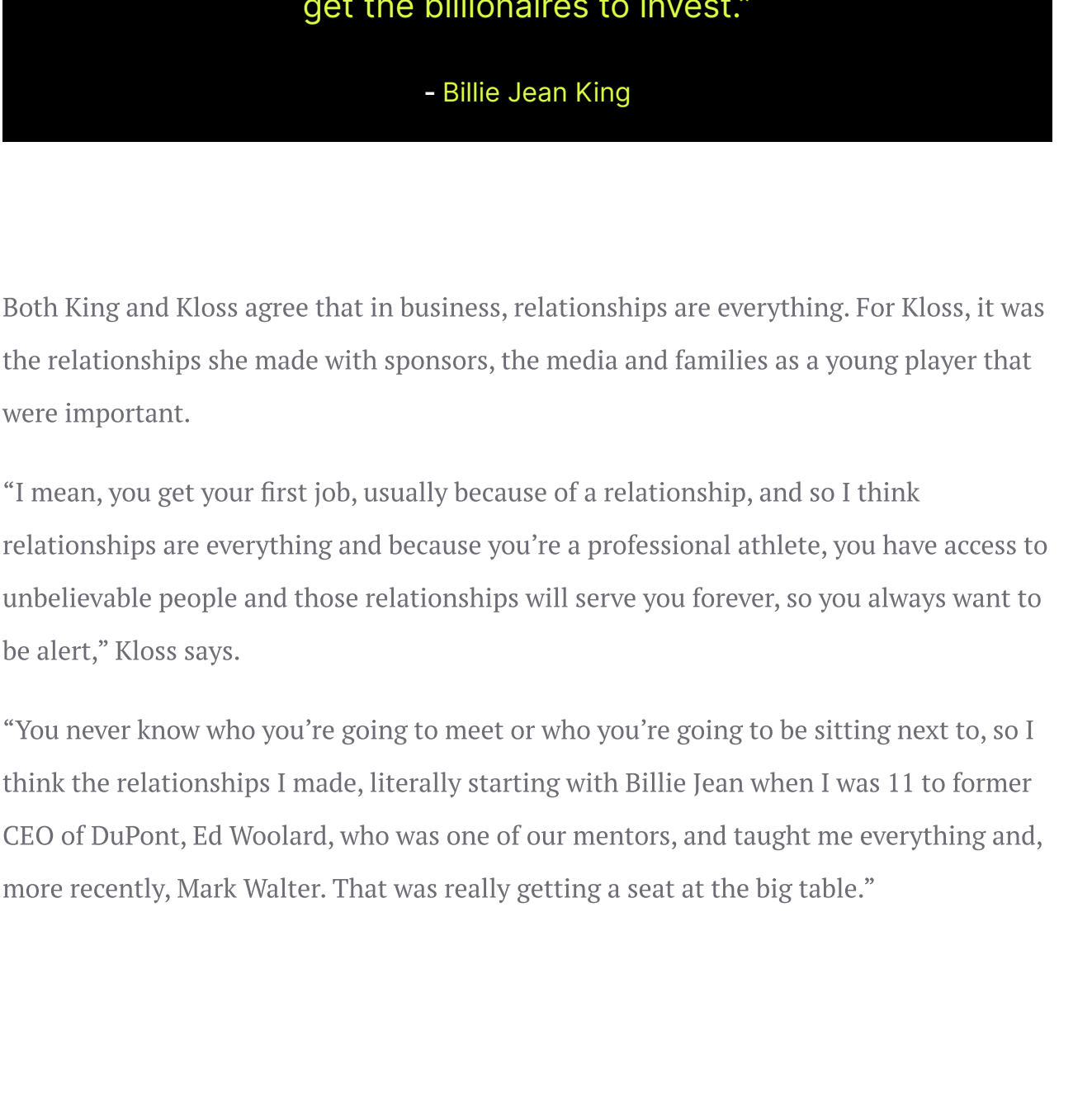
King maintains that the relationships she's fostered with men in business go a long way to getting money poured into women's sport.

"It's still men most of the time who have the big bucks, and we've got to get them to believe in us. And if I hadn't had great male mentors and great male allies, we would not be where we are, because they're still the ones who have the money, the wherewithal and the power," she says.

"But it's changing; now male millionaires and billionaires think they can make a return on their investment, whereas before it was just about kind of helping us, and that's the biggest difference. And we're seeing that shift finally."

Indeed, Kloss says that while King has always been driven to help girls and women, she's also "doing it for everyone".

"She's big on bringing the men along, because it's the guys who have to change. Her strength is that she's an incredible uniter and she's able to bring people with different points of view, different religions, different races, together for the common cause," Kloss says.



"It feels like women's sport is at a tipping point. We're starting to get the billionaires to invest."

– Billie Jean King

Both King and Kloss agree that in business, relationships are everything. For Kloss, it was the relationships she made with sponsors, the media and families as a young player that were important.

"I mean, you get your first job, usually because of a relationship, and so I think relationships are everything and because you're a professional athlete, you have access to unbelievable people and those relationships will serve you forever, so you always want to be alert," Kloss says.

"You never know who you're going to meet or who you're going to be sitting next to, so I think the relationships I made, literally starting with Billie Jean when I was 11 to former CEO of DuPont, Ed Woolard, who was one of our mentors, and taught me everything and, more recently, Mark Walter. That was really getting a seat at the big table."