

ASHE'S DIAMONDS ARTHUR ASHE INSPIRED A GENERATION OF BLACK AMERICANS. THEIR SONS AND DAUGHTERS ARE CHANGING THE FACE OF TENNIS TODAY.

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Author: Charles Bricker Staff Writer
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It has been nearly 30 years since Arthur Ashe defeated Jimmy Connors in the final at Wimbledon and forever changed the complexion of professional tennis. But only now, more than a generation later, is the game feeling the full force of Ashe's racial impact.

There have never been more black players in organized tennis than there are today, and there's every reason to believe the numbers will rise in the years to come.

When Althea Gibson won the U.S. Open in 1957 and 1958, she was the only black American woman in the game. During Ashe's 12-year career, from 1968 to 1979, he was virtually the only black American man in the game.

Today, not only is the number of black players on the pro tours at an all-time high, so is the small army of teenagers preparing to exit the junior ranks.

Venus and Serena Williams, James Blake, Mashona Washington, Angela Haynes, Chanda Rubin and Shenay Perry have established careers. Behind them is the next wave -- Jamea Jackson, Jewel Peterson, Timothy Neilly, Donald Young, Scoville Jenkins, Phillip Simmonds and Marcus Fugate.

And behind them, just emerging as juniors, are three more major prospects -- Asia Muhammad, 14, of Henderson, Nev.; Brittany Augustine, 13, of Northridge, Calif.; and Evan King, 13, of Chicago.

There is finally a black pipeline in tennis, and it's flowing freely for three major reasons:

The profound influence Ashe had on the parents of the players that are out there today.

The commitment from the United States Tennis Association to reach out to inner-city children with the financial support to train them and fund their travel.

And, perhaps the greatest motivator, the prize money to be had in professional tennis.

"It's a revolution," said former pro Kim Sands, who was on Key Biscayne in December to watch Neilly defeat Young in the final of the Orange Bowl junior tournament, the first time black teenagers have faced each other for a major junior championship.

"I'm still shaking. To see that match ... to see those two guys out there. It was a spiritual experience," said Sands, who was the University of Miami's first black player before embarking on a 10-year pro career that ended in 1987.

Ernie Peterson, 60, one of the most enduring of Atlanta tennis coaches and father of Jewel Peterson, seldom saw a tennis court growing up in segregated Century, a small town in the Florida panhandle.

And then, in 1975, he witnessed the Wimbledon final on television.

"You didn't have to know anything about tennis," said Peterson. "Here was this black guy beating this white guy at his game. Beating Jimmy Connors, who speaks more smack than any player in the world.

"We all saw Arthur doing his number, every last one of us. And now, what you're seeing today are the kids of the kids who watched Arthur."

The phenomenal success of the Williams sisters has inspired and pushed black tennis players along.

"Venus and Serena opened everyone's eyes," said Sands, who oversees the biggest inner-city tennis program in Miami. "They came along, and they never changed their persona just to be more acceptable to everyone. They were more Afro-centric, and when black kids saw the beads and them just being themselves ... why wouldn't we be attracted to that?"

But what got most of these kids into tennis originally, long before the Williams sisters became international news, were their parents, who grew up watching Ashe.

"Arthur's influence will stretch for quite a long time," said Rodney Harmon, who in 1982, along with Ashe, became the second black player to reach the quarterfinals of the U.S. Open.

Harmon, who was the first head of the USTA's Multicultural Development program, is director of men's tennis for the USTA's High Performance Program.

He pointed out that tennis has always been part of the black community, with at least one professional every few years from Gibson to Ashe to himself to Zina Garrison, Lori McNeil, Sands, MaliVai Washington (who was Wimbledon runner-up in 1996), and finally to Blake and the Williams sisters.

But black players are proliferating because the USTA is putting out about \$400,000 a year in grants to get quality instruction and travel funds for black kids who have the potential to be pros and because of neighborhood programs like First Serve, which is based in Fort Lauderdale.

First Serve is in 20 major cities in the United States, reaching thousands of inner-city children in a program that emphasizes academics as well as tennis.

"This is one of the most exciting times I can remember on the men's side of African-American tennis," said Harmon, who grew up on the same side of Richmond, Va., as Ashe and whose life was touched by Ashe along with the parents with whom he deals.

"Phillip Simmonds ... a very good basketball player. But his father got him into the game because he loved tennis," said Harmon. "Donald Young ... both his parents are coaches. They got him into tennis."

Ernie Jackson, father of Jamea Jackson, was three years into his career as an NFL cornerback when Ashe won Wimbledon. He would get his daughter into tennis one day.

"I played football, basketball and ran track in high school. Most black athletes didn't play tennis," said Thomas Fugate, father of 17-year-old Marcus Fugate, who won the invitational Luxilon Juniors recently during the second week of the Nasdaq-100 Open.

"I had played tennis before 1975, but the impact Arthur Ashe had was on my desire to keep playing. He made it OK for men to play the game."

Fugate would pass his love of tennis on to his son.

But not every black family can afford a sport that requires expensive equipment and expensive coaching, and so the USTA stepped in 10 years ago.

"A lot of black kids started with the USTA," Ernie Peterson said. "The money was available, and the key was to hire good help. You have to toss about 50 million balls to one kid to develop him. Well, if you have two or three other pros, it's a lot easier."

He also is careful to tell the kids he coaches that the route to fame and money is not easy.

While the Williams sisters have 11 Grand Slam titles between them, no other black player active today has won a major.

Professional tennis is international, and it's a tough grind. Blake, who came out of Harvard to reach No. 22 in the rankings in 2003, has fallen back to 189 and is struggling to come back from injuries suffered in 2004.

Young, 15, is the No. 1 junior in the world, but there are questions about his strength. Simmonds and Jenkins left the juniors this year to begin playing Futures and Challengers, the bush leagues of pro tennis. They have enough size, but will they get Young's touch and feel for the game?

Jackson has gotten four years of intensive help from the USTA. She's still trying to break into the top 100.

But they're staying with it, helped along in no small way by the example of the Williams sisters.

"Seeing someone else like you from your background would inspire anyone," says Jackson, who at age 10 had a poster of Venus affixed to her bedroom wall.

And what inspired the Williamses? While Ashe and the USTA have been the key catalysts, don't underestimate the allure of the dollar.

Venus and Serena were driven not so much by Gibson and Ashe, but by their father, Richard Williams, and the prospect of wealth. Together, the sisters have earned an estimated \$35 million in prize money.

Many of the kids Peterson tutors come from poor families.

"The poverty level is unspeakable," he said. "But these families have used that as a motivator to stand up and do what they have to do to have success."

Back at Moore Park in Miami, where Sands has an office, there's a bulletin board adorned with photos of about 30 black teenagers who are nationally or internationally ranked juniors.

The message is simple and clear: If they can do it, so can you.

"It's definitely a plus for me to see so many of us out there," Jamea Jackson said as she contemplated the future for black players in tennis.

"But now, you just want to give that inspiration to someone else."

Charles Bricker can be reached at cbricker@sun-sentinel.com

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