

Tennis Opens Up

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It may sound incredible to most, but according to two studies, African Americans are the most avid tennis fans of any racial group. There was a great deal of excitement surrounding the women in the US Open. Much of it emanated from an anticipated final that was not to be between the Williams sisters. It was not that long ago that having an African-American man or woman in the final was incredibly unlikely. Last year, Serena won it all. This year it was Venus all the way.

I have followed the USTA for nearly 30 years. Based on my own early contact, I would never have predicted the diverse make up of today's fans. In 1976 I formed ACCESS, which became the national coalition of groups that came together to boycott South Africa in sport. I fought USTA leadership over their continuing relationship with South Africa even as apartheid became more and more oppressive. My earliest contacts with Arthur Ashe were attempting to stop him from going to play in South Africa, thus breaking the international boycott of the racist regime.

I never doubted that Arthur believed he was doing the right thing by going but I was just as convinced that his presence was being used by the government and the apartheid sports authorities. Our first test in the United States was outside at the 1977 US Open protesting individual South Africa players. These were the early days of the anti-apartheid movement. We had 75 protesters that day in Queens and thought it was a big success.

And it was. As we marched, a TV commentator approached me and said Arthur Ashe was coming out to address the crowd. We all were very apprehensive that he was going to come out and tell everyone that "you don't understand. I was there. We need to show the South Africans what integration means."

As the only prominent black tennis player, that could have killed the protest. Instead, he came out and told us that he "had been wrong to go. The South Africans used me. When I went to buy ticket for some African youth, I was told I had to go to the 'African window' to make the purchase. I got out on the first available flight."

Arthur Ashe became the movement's strongest ally and a close personal friend. Together with the late Ambassador Franklin Williams, we helped convince John McEnroe to cancel his \$1million match in Bophutatswana. He became the first prominent white athlete to reject the government's gold.

But today I have an appreciation for the USTA because I have seen its transformation from an organization that stood for exclusion to one that he moved toward inclusion. Tennis is a sport which historically had been largely reserved for the wealthy and for those living in suburbs. Tennis' grasses have been turning into welcoming places for the masses.

With the spectacular play of the Williams sisters, tennis again has stars of color. They are peaking even more interest in the African-American community. The results of both the ESPN Chilton and Nielsen Media Research showed that African Americans are the most avid tennis fans in any racial group.

In 1999, 11% of African Americans called themselves avid tennis fans vs only 7.1% in golf where Tiger Woods has led a tremendous increase in African-American fans between 1998 and 1999. Golf got a 1 year 14% boost from Woods while in Tennis African-American fans surged by 36% over two years. Yes, tennis has had some recent African American stars and role models like Zina Garrison and Mali Vai Washington but the arrival of the Williams sisters has been an incredible catalyst.

The 11% of African Americans saying they are avid tennis fans is nearly twice the 5.7% of whites who identify themselves as such.

Tennis is the 4th most popular sport among African Americans after:

- * NFL (39%)
- * NBA (37.4)
- * MLB (18.2%).

It is 7th for whites after:

- * NFL (29%)
- * MLB (18.9%)
- * NBA (15.4%)
- * motor sports (12%)
- * golf (9%)
- * NHL (8%).

Urban youth tennis programs have been a tremendous help. By providing children in cities with these opportunities, USTA programs are showing them that adults do care about children. By providing opportunities for children of color, many white officials, coaches and players are showing these children that there are white people who care about all people irrespective of color. Yes, the grasses are changing for the masses.

But what does the future hold for people of color at the elite levels of tennis? Certainly a look at the past would not give us much optimism. While Judy Levering is the first woman president of the USTA, white males still control most of the operations on all levels of sport, including tennis. The successes of Serena and Venus Williams, while so important, is but a faint knock on the door at the elite level of tennis.

Hopes were high when Althea Gibson won at Wimbledon. But four decades separated her from the next African-American woman champions. Unless more people of color compete in sport as children, it is unlikely that they will be part of the sports world as adults. Today those chances are severely limited by the scarcity of programs for boys and girls in urban areas. Urban youth tennis programs are helping to change that.

Tennis helped to break the shackles of apartheid in South Africa. Now tennis, spreading its benefits in urban areas, can help heal some of our own racial wounds in America and can help give vision to children fighting to believe in what they cannot see.

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