September: Arthur Ashe Wins the United States Open

The United States Tennis Open is the professional version of one of the oldest hard court tennis tournaments in the world. First known as the U. S. National Championship, it dates back to 1881. The tournament was for amateur players; it was not until 1968 that professionals were allowed to compete.

Arthur Ashe was born in Richmond, Virginia, the cradle of the old confederacy, in 1943. After his mother’s death in 1950, Ashe and his brother Johnnie, were raised by their father, Arthur Ashe, Sr. The older Ashe was a caretaker/special policeman for the city’s recreation department. The three lived in the caretaker’s house on the grounds of the oldest blacks-only park in the city of Richmond. Indeed, had it not been for Virginia’s virulent racism, Ashe may never have learned to play tennis. The park contained a pool, several baseball diamonds, and tennis and basketball courts. Too skinny for basketball or football, Ashe began playing tennis when he was seven years old, and was tutored in the basics by Ron Charity, the top African American tennis player in Richmond.

At Charity’s urging, Ashe started entering tournaments, and in 1953 Charity affected an introduction to Robert Walter Johnson, who coached the black female player Althea Gibson. Ashe was coached by Johnson until 1960. Johnson drilled into Ashe the etiquette and composure he was so well known for during his life. Unfortunately, Ashe was excluded from competing against white children in Richmond, and the city’s indoor courts were off limits to blacks. He and his father thought it best if he moved to St. Louis, Missouri, to work with the tennis coach and friend of Johnson, Richard Hudlin. He was also permitted to use the courts at
the National Guard Armory, and in 1961, Ashe was finally allowed to compete in the U. S. Interscholastic tournament, where he won the trophy for his school.

Ashe earned a number of African American firsts, including the title in the National Junior Indoor tournament and a tennis scholarship to the University of California, Los Angeles, from which he earned a bachelor’s degree in business administration. He was the first black player ever accepted for the country’s Davis Cup team, and was the third ranked amateur player in the U.S. Ashe also joined the Reserve Officers Training Corp (ROTC), and enlisted in the Army, where he was commissioned second lieutenant in the Adjutant General Corps. Ashe was sent to West Point where he was in charge of the school’s tennis program. Finally in 1963 he won the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) singles and doubles titles, helping UCLA to their national tennis title.

In 1968, Ashe won both the national amateur and professional titles, the first man to do so in the same year. Because he was an amateur, he was unable to accept the $14,000 offered to the winner of the U. S. Open. Also in 1968, he helped the U. S. hang onto the Davis Cup championship. Nineteen sixty-eight was the first year Ashe tried to enter the South African Open, but he was denied a visa due to its segregation policies. He continued to seek entry to the tournament, and simultaneously campaigned for U. S. sanctions against South Africa because of apartheid. Ashe worked diligently to have South Africa dismissed from the International Lawn Tennis Federation.

Ashe was twice ranked as the number one male player, and retired from tennis in 1980. He continued his activism against racism for the rest of his life. Ashe died of AIDS in 1993 at the age of forty-nine, having contracted the disease from a blood transfusion after a second heart bypass operation.
Further Reading

