

**SYMBOLS OF CHANGE  
MINORITY TENNIS – A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE**

By [Bob Davis](#)

**PART I  
THE BEGINNING**

Slavery was abolished in the United States in 1865. Nearly 15 years later, in 1880, the United States Lawn Tennis Association (USLTA) was founded (The name was later changed to USTA). Tennis was the dominion of the white, upper class and Blacks were neither interested, nor invited to participate. Segregation was rampant throughout America and an attitude of exclusion was pervasive in most areas of American society.

Blacks began to surface on tennis courts in about 1890 at Tuskegee Institute. Booker T. Washington, one of America's great, black visionaries and leaders, founded Tuskegee. In his famous Atlanta Address of 1895, Booker T. Washington set forth the motivating spirit behind Tuskegee Institute. In a post Reconstruction era marked by growing segregation and disfranchisement of blacks, this spirit was based on what realistically might be achieved in that time and place. *"The opportunity to earn a dollar in a factory just now," he observed, "is worth infinitely more than the opportunity to spend a dollar in an opera house."* Because of Washington's extraordinary ability to work within the system and to maximize the possible, Tuskegee flourished to the extent only dreamed about when he met his first students on July 4, 1881.

By 1898, Blacks began to have inter-club matches with rival black clubs in New York, Philadelphia and a variety of other eastern seaboard cities. These inter-club rivalries were primarily networking opportunities; occasions for the black, college-graduated elite to commune with their colleagues from other cities. This group of clubs eventually grew in number until an organizational structure was needed. In 1916, the American Tennis Association (ATA) was created as the governing body of Black tennis in America. In the fifty years since slavery was abolished, 80% of the Black population became educated. Nearly 4 million people came out of slavery as legislated illiterates and by 1915; an elite middle-class had been formed. By today's standards, this is a phenomenal accomplishment. When one considers the growing rate of illiteracy across America, illiteracy that transcends racial lines, we should look at this statistic with awe and wonder!

In any event, it was this continuing attitude of separation that caused a group of black professionals to form the American Tennis Association (ATA) in 1916. The primary mission of the ATA was the formation of a circuit of black clubs and tournaments across the country. This new organization permitted the black elite to travel from city to city, network amongst their peers and enjoy the game of tennis. These separate but unequal tennis societies continued without conflict for nearly 25 years. While blacks enjoyed the social and the networking opportunities provided by the ATA, the USLTA enjoyed the pristine, private, country club environment that offered the same opportunities to its constituency.

In many ways, this elite Black society was born of necessity. Blacks were determined to do for themselves what the segregated governing society refused to do for them. Significantly, these elite middle-class Blacks were graduates of Black colleges and universities and were educated in the Arts and Sciences. They became doctors, lawyers and educators and, because there was no access to professional sports at that time, went to college to develop the foundations for lifetime careers.



Reginald Weir (l) & Desi Margetson  
New York State Doubles Champs  
1946

And so, Black business – and Black tennis flourished during the first quarter of the twentieth century. The ATA held its first national championship in 1917 in Baltimore, MD. Tally Holmes and Lucy Slowe emerged as the winners of that historic event. It was obvious that the ATA had gotten off to a resounding start and now emphasis was being placed on increasing the number of new clubs and the creation of junior development programs. By the mid-1930's there were more than 100 member-clubs, many of them private, black-owned tennis and golf country clubs. This idyllic serenity was about to undergo a change as players began to improve and the desire to compete at the highest levels of the sport took on greater importance. The very first confrontation came in 1929 when Reginald Weir and Gerald Norman were denied entry into the National Indoors in New York City. Both paid their entry fees, but upon presenting themselves to play in the event, were denied the opportunity to participate. Formal complaints were filed by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and the following response was received from the USLTA:

“...the policy of the USLTA has been to decline the entry of colored players in our championships... In pursuing this policy we make no reflection upon the colored race but we believe that as a practical matter, the present methods of separate associations should be continued.” Neither Weir nor Norman was permitted to play, but it was now clear that the cauldron was being stirred.

## PART II THE EMERGENCE OF A BLACK CHAMPION

Role models within black communities were also easy to find during the forty's and fifty's. Segregation prevented successful Blacks from moving into the white, suburban communities, so "inner-city" children resided alongside doctors, lawyers and other legitimate businesspeople. Bandleader Duke Ellington, lightweight boxing champion Beau Jack, New York Giants baseball player Hank Thompson and other world-class entertainers lived within one block of my family's New York City apartment.



**Jimmy McDaniels**

In 1940, Donald Budge, the finest white player in America, took it upon himself to go into Harlem, in New York City, to play an exhibition match at the Black owned Cosmopolitan Tennis Club. He played against the top black player of the day, Jimmy McDaniel. The fact that McDaniel lost the match handily is no more than a footnote to the significance of Budge's appearance. It was the first time that a black player was able to test his skills against a white player; to gauge his strokes, strategy and knowledge of the sport against the best in the world. A white player had taken a stand in support of equal opportunity. Players, you see, have never been the problem; it has always been the administration struggling to break with tradition.

In 1946, a crude, street-tough, 19 year-old named Althea Gibson attracted the attention of two physicians, Dr. Hubert Eaton and Dr. R. Walter Johnson. An arrogant teenager, Althea lost



in the finals of the ATA Women's National Championships but her strength and athletic prowess was undeniable. She won the junior national titles in 1944 & 1945 and now, in her first year playing in the adult division, immediately became a serious challenge to the best ATA women players. By 1949, more than 30 years after the formation of the ATA, Althea began to challenge the collective imagination of the Black tennis community. She was seen as one outstanding player who had the potential to break the color barrier. But, there were problems! Blacks understood that a flaw attributed to one colored athlete would be attributed to all people of color. And Althea had flaws! She had not graduated from high school and her social graces were severely lacking. To Althea, competition was **WAR!** A loss would see her head straight for the locker room; no handshake, no "nice-match", no smiles or other generally accepted niceties typically associated with tennis. These "flaws" would need to be corrected lest those that would follow her be burdened with her baggage. In fact, it was generally believed that if her "flaws" weren't repaired, no one would be allowed to follow her. At the urging of world boxing champion Sugar Ray Robinson, Althea moved to Wilmington, NC to live with Dr. Eaton and his family as she studied to secure a high school diploma. This proximity to Dr. Eaton would also provide an opportunity to instill the manners and perspective that she would need to succeed. Summers had

been well spent in training at Dr. Johnson's home in Lynchburg, VA. By this time, Althea had become the class-of-the-field. She began to raise national awareness when, as a high school sophomore, she won 9 ATA tournaments without a loss. The overall strategy worked and in 1949, at the age of 22, Althea received her high school diploma and her graduation ring (paid for by welter-weight champion of the world, Sugar Ray Robinson).

The recognition that she received would pressure the USLTA to accept her entries into the Eastern Indoors and the National Indoors in 1949. She reached the quarterfinals of both events and now hoped to play the grass court circuit that led up to the USLTA National Championships at Forest Hills, New York. (In the pre-U.S. Open era, the U.S. National Championships were held on grass courts not far from today's National Tennis Center in Flushing Meadows). But, the USLTA had not yet decided if it would allow this "colored" woman to be the first of her race to play in America's most prestigious tournament. Contrary to many reports, the first African-American to win a national tournament was not Althea Gibson, but a lefty from Los Angeles named Oscar Johnson. Oscar won the Long Beach Open Junior Championships in Long Beach, CA in July of 1948 and the very next month won the National Public Parks Junior Championships in Los Angeles. In August of 1953, Oscar became the third black male to play in the U.S. National Championships at Forest Hills, NY. By this time, Althea was beginning to get the recognition she deserved.

Racial prejudice, to many people of color, was a very confusing experience. Many wondered how Pancho Segura, a man of color from Guayaquil, Ecuador, stricken with Rickets during childhood, was so easily welcomed into this lily-white environment. He was considerably darker in color than Althea, yet his acceptance never questioned. His bout with rickets caused his legs to be severely bowed and he was quite pigeon-toed. In fact, Billy Talbert and Segura, ranked number one and three in America respectively, represented the USLTA in an exhibition in Harlem in 1945. Talbert disposed of Jimmy McDaniels 6-2, 6-1, while Pancho beat Lloyd Scott, 6-2, 6-2. Pancho thrilled the Cosmopolitan crowds with his two fisted (baseball-like) style. In spite of his infirmities, Pancho was quite a good player. His earliest success came as a student at the University of Miami, where he won the NCAA singles championships three times in a row (from 1943 to 1945), a feat not matched in the twentieth century. I mention this only as a point of interest because Althea held no animosity towards Pancho; or anyone else for that matter. His unconditional acceptance into the white, inner-circle, indeed his affiliation with the USLTA was, and remains, somewhat of a curiosity.

Now, a nearly two decades after Don Budge stood his ground and broke with tradition, one of America's finest women players would stand up for Althea. Alice Marble, one of the finest white players in America would challenge the administration to allow her to compete. She wrote an impassioned letter to the American Lawn Tennis Magazine in 1950 that was primarily responsible for Althea's ability to play in and win Wimbledon and the U.S. National Titles in 1957 & 58.

This letter, given the time, context and author eloquently exposed the prejudice more clearly than anything before or since.

The letter read:

“On my current lecture tours, the question I am most frequently expected to answer is no longer: What do you think of Gussie’s panties? For every individual who still cares whether Gussie Moran has lace on her drawers, there are three who want to know if Althea Gibson will be permitted to play in the Nationals this year. Not being privy to the sentiments of the USLTA committee, I couldn’t answer their questions, but I came back to New York determined to find out. When I directed the question at a committee member of long standing, his answer, tacitly given, was in the negative. Unless something within the realm of the supernatural occurs, Miss Gibson will not be permitted to play in the Nationals.

He said nothing of the sort, of course. The attitude of the committee will be that Miss Gibson has not sufficiently proven herself. True enough, she was a finalist in the National Indoors, the gentleman admitted – but didn’t I think the field was awfully poor? I did not. It is my opinion that Miss Gibson performed beautifully under the circumstances. Considering how little play she has had in top competition, her win over a seasoned veteran like Midge Buck seems to me a real triumph. Nevertheless the committee, according to this member, insists that in order to qualify for the Nationals, Miss Gibson must also make a strong showing in the major eastern tournaments to be played between now and the date set for the big do at Forest Hills. Most of these major tournaments – Orange, East Hampton, Essex, etc, - are invitational, of course. If she is not invited to participate in them, as my committee member freely predicted, then she obviously will not be able to prove anything at all, and it will be the reluctant duty of the committee to reject her entry at Forest Hills. Miss Gibson is over a very cunningly wrought barrel, and I can only hope to loosen a few of its staves with one lone opinion.

I think it’s time we faced a few facts. If tennis is a game for ladies and gentlemen, it’s also time we acted a little more like gentle people and less like sanctimonious hypocrites. If there is anything left in the name of sportsmanship, it’s more than time f\to display what it means to us. If Althea Gibson represents a challenge to the present crop of women players, it’s only fair that they should meet that challenge on the courts, where tennis is played. I know those girls, and I can’t think of one who would refuse to meet Miss Gibson in competition. She might be soundly beaten for a while – but she has a much better chance on the courts than in the inner sanctum of the committee, where a different kind of game is played.” In closing, Miss Marble wrote: “I am beating no drums for Miss Gibson as a player of outstanding quality. As I said, I have seen her only in the National Indoors, where she obviously did play her best and was still able to display some lovely shots. To me, she is a fellow tennis player and, as such, deserving of the chance I had to prove myself. I’ve never met Miss Gibson but, to me, she is a fellow human being to whom equal privileges ought to be extended. Speaking for myself, I will be glad to help Althea Gibson in any way I can. If I can improve her game or merely give her the benefit of my own experiences, as I have many other young players, I’ll do that. If I can give her an iota more of confidence by rooting my heart out from the gallery, she can take my ford for it: I’ll be there.”

This impassioned letter was singularly responsible for Althea’s acceptance into several qualifying tournaments and for her admittance into the 1950 U.S Nationals. Althea easily won her first round match and lost in the second round of the Nationals to Louise Brough, a three-time Wimbledon Champion and the 1947 United States Champion. The 9-7 third set loss to

Brough put everyone on notice that a serious, new contender had arrived. Althea had broken the color barrier! She went on to win the French Open singles and doubles and the Wimbledon



doubles titles in 1956. She became the undisputed best player in the world by winning Wimbledon and the U.S National singles titles in 1957 and 1958. Althea retired to pursue a career in professional golf and as an entertainer, but before leaving this page I want to say to Althea Gibson (whom I have known, admired, played tennis with and whom I have called a friend since I was a kid) “Althea, you did us proud!”



Althea was also a celebrity of world-class proportions in her adopted hometown of New York City. She became a product spokesperson for the Ward Baking Company and (At left) was greeted on the steps of City Hall by Mayor Robert Wagner. Like Jackie Robinson before her, Althea had finally become “somebody.” She won Wimbledon and the U.S. Open in 1957 and 1958 – something that no Black woman has ever done before....or since.

## PART III

### THE THIRD GENERATION



**Arthur Ashe,**  
**Bob Davis**

At the end of Althea's career, Dr. Johnson realized that his dream of helping to produce a world champion was successful. But, he had something else up his sleeve... For the past several years, he had been grooming other talented youngsters at his home in Lynchburg, Virginia. Each summer, a group of the most talented minority youth from across the country would gather at his home to train and play tournaments. I was selected as the northeastern candidate and this is how I met the next world champion, Arthur Ashe. We were a talented group but it soon became clear that Arthur was something special. He was a quiet, determined youngster and was developing a formidable tennis game. In Dr. Johnson's opinion, Arthur was perfect to lead the charge because he was unflappable. Insults, flagrant cheating and verbal abuse would roll off of Arthur's back without effect. The mission was clear; win quietly and respond to nothing but the tennis ball. It was further made clear that any of us that reacted to the bad calls; any of us that argued; any of us that responded to

the verbal slurs or challenged the fairness of the situation, would be sent home immediately. Although none of us were sent home for violations of these rules, those of us from the big, northern cities had to bite our tongues. Arthur, on the other had was born and raised in the segregated south. His father was the public park attendant at the tennis courts across the street from his home and he couldn't play on those courts because he was black. He seemed to understand that he was destined for greatness and that his icy-cool demeanor was a key to success. We were made to understand that an outburst by one of us, would be seen as a negative characteristic of the entire group. Tournament directors would be able to say, "See, I knew they'd act that way if we let them into the tournament!" There were many youngsters placed in that situation over the years, but, none of us ever allowed those words to be uttered.

After civil rights legislation was enacted in 1964, history would show that the black elite moved to exclusive, suburban communities. Some people believe that this suburban exodus was the beginning of the decline in the growth of black tennis as well as a slowing of the positive growth in the black community. Others believe that the ability to live beside and emulate positive role models, along with the forced creation of a homogeneous community, were positive aspects of segregation. Black businessmen both legitimate and otherwise, were guaranteed to be successful - as a direct result of segregation. Any Black that opened a grocery store, produce stand or repair store was certain to capture the business of the local constituency, because those customers were not permitted to patronize white-owned stores. This environment provided fertile ground for entrepreneurs; legitimate businessmen and hustlers alike.



It is into this era that Arthur Ashe emerged as a standout tennis player. In some ways, Arthur was a most unlikely role model and world champion. He was slender, almost frail looking. He was mild-mannered; always appearing to be passive, unemotional and reserved. Did he possess the strength, focus and determination to overcome the alienation of segregation, along with the rejection and degradation that was sure to be in his future? Wouldn't someone from the north - someone with a more aggressive personality - someone who would defy the system have a better chance to overcome the odds? History would show that Arthur was the perfect candidate. He was simply better than the rest of us. He was a likeable young man and if you were not a hard-core racist, you would find Arthur friendly, personable and non-confrontational. Even in his memoirs, "Days of Grace", one can sense his absence of anger. Concerning his inability to play tournament tennis in his hometown of Richmond, Virginia, Arthur said: ***"I remember the kindly white tennis official, Sam Woods, who would not allow me to play in municipal tournaments in Richmond, and all the other not-so-kindly officials who barred my way so that I finally played in only one official tennis tournament while I was a junior in Virginia."***

His success as a Davis Cup player and his U.S. Open and Wimbledon titles are legendary. But, his recognition at tennis became the tool that he would use to challenge society to end the racial injustice that plagued the planet. He made several trips to South Africa (against the wishes of many Black leaders in America) to pressure the government to end apartheid. He marched on Washington in support of the fair treatment of Haitian refugees. His life was dedicated to the elevation of his people. He focused a great deal of his attention on education. He encouraged youngsters to become doctors and lawyers. He wanted youngsters to attend and graduate from college instead of putting all of their energy into athletics. He realized that less than 1% of varsity athletes ever signed a professional sports contract. At the same time, he made many attempts to create a system that produced a pipeline of young black players that could use tennis as a vehicle to take them to college. One such program was his collaboration with Nick Bollettieri. The Ashe-Bollettieri "Cities" Tennis Program (ABC) taught tennis to more than 10,000 children. The program attempted to impress upon them the value of preventive health education and the importance of staying in school. Hundreds from this program (which later became the Arthur Ashe Safe Passage Foundation) went on to college on either academic or athletic scholarships. It was one of the programs that made Arthur most proud. Before Arthur died, he got a glimpse of Venus and Serena Williams, two young girls that would, for a short time, take over the reins of leadership after his voice was silenced. But, Arthur would not live to see the emergence of James Blake. James possessed many qualities that would enamor him to the tennis community at large. He is handsome, articulate and Harvard University educated. More importantly, he is thoughtful, non-confrontational and non-threatening. James, if he is so inclined, will be the heir-apparent to Arthur's throne; the voice of Black tennis. Because, you see, like Arthur, the voice of James Blake is the only one that is likely to resonate with the powers that be.

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