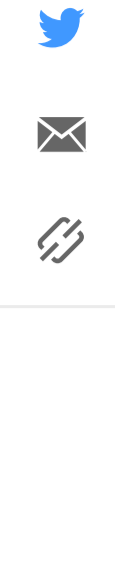


The Executive Wallet

Your business essentials in a slim leather case



SHOP NOW



BOOKS | BOOKSHELF

'Arthur Ashe' Review: A Hard Road to Glory

In an age full of outspoken athletes, the diffident Ashe often seemed more focused on fighting apartheid in South Africa than on the black struggle at home.

By Edward Kosner

Updated Aug. 17, 2018 9:31 am ET

SAVE PRINT TEXT

5

Just 4 foot 8 and 70 pounds with matchstick arms and legs, the 11-year-old clutched his tennis racket as he stared across the net at the 15-year-old girl. She was annoyed that a scheduling glitch had forced her to play the kid at an all-black tennis tournament in Washington, D.C., and suspected the organizers wanted to embarrass her by making her face an obviously overmatched little boy. An hour later, racing around the court and hitting slingshot forehands with surprising power and accuracy, the kid had demolished her in straight sets.

It was Arthur Ashe Jr.'s first big win in a 25-year run of relentless effort that took him to the top of the tennis world and made him an icon of black achievement.



Pathologically self-controlled Arthur Ashe at Wimbledon in 1975. PHOTO: FOCUS ON SPORT/GETTY IMAGES

ARTHUR ASHE: A LIFE

By Raymond Arsenault Simon & Schuster, 767 pages, \$37.50

NEWSLETTER SIGN-UP

Books

Be the first to find out what's new and what's good. Get the weekend book reviews before the weekend.

PREVIEW SUBSCRIBE

Watching Ashe play Jimmy Connors two decades later at Wimbledon in 1975 on YouTube is a revelation. Slender and graceful, he thwarts Mr. Connors with piercing serves, artfully carved volleys and pinpoint backhands, often taking off the pace to confound his bulldog opponent. When he hoisted the trophy, Ashe became not just the first African-American man to win the most prestigious title in tennis but likely the first ever to play at the green sanctuary of the All England Club.

That Wimbledon victory was a high point of Ashe's career, one of the most memorable in American sports. He is as much a pioneer as Jack Johnson, Joe Louis and Muhammad Ali, Jackie Robinson, Jim Brown, Bill Russell and Althea Gibson. Appropriately enough, the 2018 U.S. Open begins later this month in the big bowl of a stadium in New York named for him. Now he has been entombed in a thick brick of a biography that muffles his court wizardry with clunky prose and potted history.

At more than 700 pages, "Arthur Ashe: A Life" is plainly a labor of love by Raymond Arsenault, a history professor at the University of South Florida. He has set himself a worthy task: to tell Ashe's story in the context of the push for civil rights in America and the arduous ascent of black tennis players to the pinnacle commanded today by Serena Williams. One problem is that the diffident Ashe—who died at 49 in 1993 of complications of AIDS contracted from a blood transfusion—was for many years more focused on fighting apartheid 8,000 miles away in South Africa than on the black struggle at home. The other is that the social and political history tends to diffuse the focus from Ashe's own epochal career.

The result is an encyclopedic recitation. It's hard to believe that Ashe ever played a match, conducted a clinic or attended a tennis-organization board meeting that Mr. Arsenault hasn't recorded here. Nor is there a tournament in the separate-but-unequal world of black amateur tennis that goes unmentioned. Or a defiant Stokely Carmichael "Black Power" shout while the Rev. Martin Luther King was discouraging use of the incendiary cry. The lifeless prose doesn't help. "Ashe's emerging consciousness of an imperfect social order in need of radical reform was not the only change affecting his life that year," reads a typical sentence.

Still, Ashe's remarkable story is worth reading, however ponderously it's told. Unlike flamboyant stars of his era like Mr. Connors, Ilie Nastase and later John McEnroe, Ashe was a pathologically self-controlled grinder. He grew up in a house within a segregated public park in Richmond, Va., that was supervised by his father. It was just steps from a set of tennis courts. When the spindly boy showed promise, his father and his first coach drilled him not only on proper strokes but on poise and court etiquette. Then Robert Johnson, a prosperous physician who was the godfather of black tennis in the area, took over. He enrolled Ashe in his summer tennis camps and shepherded him to youth tournaments. The boy was an apt pupil on the court and in school, where he was a top student. His only interests seemed to be tennis and reading.

Throughout his life, Ashe was an odd hybrid: a conspicuous outsider who played the system as handily as he played a qualifier in the first round of a big tournament. And the system used him for its own purposes. He left his family in Richmond for a high school in St. Louis with a renowned tennis program. That was a steppingstone to a scholarship at UCLA, where he led the tennis team to an NCAA championship over powerhouse rival USC and joined the ROTC program.

Commissioned as a second lieutenant during the Vietnam War, Ashe was conveniently stationed at West Point as a data specialist and assistant tennis coach. The Army granted him countless leaves to play in tournaments that produced positive imagery for the military. His younger brother, meanwhile, fought as a Marine in the war.

Later, as a pro, Ashe made lucrative deals with, among others, the Catalina sportswear company, Head tennis rackets and Aetna insurance, for whom he recruited black trainees. The stylish Doral Hotel in Miami made him the face of its tennis program.

His lithe body, cool affect and stardom made him an ace on the dating circuit as well. A bachelor until his early 30s, he dated scores of women across racial and religious lines. When he finally settled on a bride, a beautiful mixed-race photographer named Jeanne Moutoussamy, his father was stunned to discover that Jeanne was the image of Ashe's mother as a young girl.

They married in the ecumenical chapel at the United Nations with Andrew Young, the Atlanta congressman who was Jimmy Carter's U.N. ambassador, performing the ceremony. Mr. Young had accompanied Ashe on one of his early trips to agitate against apartheid. Indeed, Ashe lobbied for years to play in the South Africa Open and to integrate sports there. Some South Africans who wanted the country and its international sports teams boycotted derided him as a carpetbagging Uncle Tom. Some Americans chastised him for ducking the racial struggle at home. In any case, Ashe's far-off focus made him less of a controversial figure to his white American sponsors.

For all his fame, Ashe won only two other Grand Slam singles titles besides his Wimbledon victory over Mr. Connors. But he did take 30 other singles titles, won three-quarters of all the matches he played and was one of the top money winners of his time. He helped bring the Davis Cup back to America as a player and later as the captain of the U.S. squad. He fought back from serious heel surgery to face (and lose to) Mr. McEnroe in a classic 1979 Grand Prix tournament final at Madison Square Garden. But then Ashe's trim body betrayed him.

The year of the McEnroe match, he suffered a heart attack and had quadruple bypass surgery. He rehabbed obsessively, hoping to resume his career, but needed a double bypass in 1983. To speed his recovery, doctors prescribed two blood transfusions.

Tennis was finished now, but Ashe didn't slow down. He worked with his sponsors, stepped up his philanthropy, especially with young black tennis players, did tennis commentary for HBO, and put in countless hours and spent more than \$200,000 on a monumental history of black athletes, "A Hard Road to Glory." Then, one day in 1988, without warning, he couldn't move his right hand—the first symptom of the AIDS infection, stemming from those blood transfusions, that had invaded the left hemisphere of his brain. It was a death sentence then, but he was as professional a patient as a tennis player. He took dozens of medications each day and kept a demanding schedule, becoming an outspoken advocate for other AIDS sufferers and for research. He was finally overwhelmed by a particularly ferocious pneumonia and died in February 1993.

Ashe led an exemplary life as an athlete and an activist, and there's surely some scholarly value in Mr. Arsenault's exhausting chronicle. Still, it's legitimate to ask how many more readers might be drawn to a shorter, more evocatively written account. Arthur Ashe was a quicksilver figure on the court, erratic at times but never boring. He deserves a book that matches his magic.

—Mr. Kosner is the author of "It's News to Me," a memoir of his career as the editor of Newsweek, New York, Esquire and the New York Daily News.

SHOW CONVERSATION (5)

SPONSORED OFFERS

Walmart: \$10 off all departments. Kohl's: 20% off your entire order with Kohl's coupon. Expedia: 50% off fully-refundable hotel bookings. eBay: Up to 15% off branded sneakers & more with eBay coupon. Home Depot: 10% off furniture using Home Depot coupon code. Target: \$15 gift card with Spectra breast pump - Target offer.

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL. CMO TODAY. Get the facts on shifting marketing trends. Sponsored by: Deloitte. SIGN UP

RECOMMENDED VIDEOS. 1. Coronavirus Pandemic Fuels China's Self-Driving Cars. 2. NYC Sets Up Traveler-Registration Checkpoints to Enforce Quarantine Orders. 3. Georgia Schools Grapple With Covid-19 Cases After Reopening. 4. Joe Biden Picks Kamala Harris as Running Mate. 5. Disney Loses Nearly \$5 Billion Amid Pandemic.

WSJ MEMBER MESSAGE: NEWSLETTER. What's New on the WSJ Bookshelf. Get a quick, curated preview of everything from book reviews to WSJ's best-seller list, delivered straight to your inbox. SIGN UP NOW

JOIN THE CONVERSATION. Beirut Explosion Unleashes Public Anger at Hezbollah, Lebanon's Most Powerful Group. S&P 500 Rallies but Closes Below a Record. Why Is It Hard to Get a Rapid Covid-19 Test? The Machines Are in Short Supply. Weekly Unemployment Claims Drop Below One Million for First Time Since March. 'The Gold Standard': Why Chinese Startups Still Flock to the U.S. for IPOs. New U.S. Coronavirus Cases Tick Up Again as Back-to-School Worries Intensify. Admit It: You Do Laundry During Work Video Calls. Stir-Crazy Travelers Are Ordering Airline Food to Relieve the Flying Experience. Coronavirus Grips Midwest Rural Areas That Had Been Spared. Real Businesses Snared in Hunt for Coronavirus Loan Scammers.