

Arthur Ashe: Tennis Champion and Civil Rights Activist

Written by Vivian Chakarian

18 September 2005

(MUSIC)

VOICE ONE:

I'm Barbara Klein.

VOICE TWO:

And I'm Steve Ember with People in America, in VOA Special English. Today we tell about the life of tennis champion Arthur Ashe.

He was an athlete and a social activist who died before he was fifty. He was honored for his bravery and honesty as well as his strong support of just causes.

(MUSIC)

VOICE ONE:

In nineteen seventy-five, Arthur Ashe played against Ilie Nastase in the Masters tennis games in Stockholm, Sweden. Nastase was out of control. He delayed the game. He called Ashe bad names.

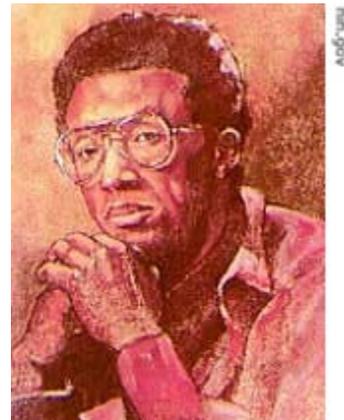
Finally, Arthur Ashe put down his tennis racket and walked off the tennis court. He said, "I've had enough. I'm at the point where I'm afraid I'll lose control. " The officials were shocked; Ashe was winning the game. One official told him he would lose if he walked out of the game. Ashe said, "I don't care. I'd rather lose that than my self-respect. "

The next day, the Masters committee met. They knew that if they gave the game to Nastase, they would be supporting his kind of actions. They felt it was how you played the game that really counted. So, the officials decided it was Nastase who must lose the game.

(MUSIC)

VOICE TWO:

Arthur Ashe was born in nineteen forty-three in the southern city of Richmond, Virginia. His parents were Mattie Cunningham Ashe and Arthur Ashe, Senior.



Arthur Ashe

In those days, black people and white people lived separately in the South. By law, African-Americans could not attend the same schools or the same churches as white people.

Arthur learned to live with racial separation. He attended an all-black school. He played in the areas kept separate for blacks. And when he traveled to his grandmother's house, he sat in the back of the bus behind a white line. Only white people could sit in the front part of the bus.

Tennis was a sport traditionally played by white people. Arthur's experience was different from most other tennis players. He grew up under poorer conditions. His father worked several jobs at the same time. And his mother died when he was six.

VOICE ONE:

Mister Ashe taught his son the importance of leading an honorable life. He said a person does not get anywhere in life by making enemies. He explained that a person gains by helping others. Arthur Ashe, Senior taught his son the importance of his friends, his family and his history. He said that without his good name, he would be nothing.

By example, Arthur's father taught the importance of hard work. His job was to drive people where they wanted to go. And he did other kinds of jobs for several wealthy families.

VOICE TWO:

When Arthur was four, his father was given responsibility for a public play area called Brook Field. It was the largest play area for black people in the city of Richmond. Mister Ashe continued to work at his other jobs as well. The family moved into a five-room house in the middle of the park.

Arthur could use the swimming pool, basketball courts, baseball fields and tennis courts in the park. He liked sports. He was not very big, but he was fast.

Arthur began playing tennis when he was seven years old. He was very small. The racket he used to hit the tennis ball seemed bigger than he was. But by the time he was thirteen years old, he was winning against players two times his size and age.

Arthur had great energy and sense of purpose. He would hit five hundred tennis balls each summer day early in the morning. He would stop to eat his morning meal. Then he would hit five hundred more tennis balls.

VOICE ONE:

When Arthur was ten years old, he met Robert Walter Johnson. Doctor Johnson established a tennis camp for black children who were not permitted to play on tennis courts for whites.

Doctor Johnson helped Arthur learn to be calm while playing tennis. He taught him to use restraint. He said that anger at an opponent was a waste of energy.

By nineteen sixty, Arthur had won the National Junior Indoor Championship. And, the University of California at Los Angeles offered him a college education if he played for the UCLA tennis team. In nineteen sixty-five, Arthur Ashe led the team to the National Collegiate Athletic Association championship. He completed his education the next year with a degree in business administration.

VOICE TWO:

Arthur Ashe then became a professional tennis player. In nineteen sixty-eight, he won the United States Open. It was the first time an African-American man had won one of the four major competitions in tennis.

In nineteen seventy, he won the Australian Open. The next year, he won the French Open Doubles Championship with Marty Riessen. And, in nineteen seventy-five, he won the Wimbledon Singles Championship in England. Two times he was named the number one tennis player in the world.

(MUSIC)

VOICE ONE:

Throughout his life, Arthur Ashe fought against social injustice. He supported racial equality and tried to bring blacks and whites together.

In nineteen seventy-three, Ashe was the first black player to be invited to compete in the South African Open. At the time, South African laws separated people by race.

Ashe knew why he was invited. He knew that the South African government was trying to change its image so it could take part in the Olympic Games. He agreed to go, but on his own terms. He played before a racially mixed group. And, he went wherever he pleased and said what he wanted.

VOICE TWO:

Arthur Ashe went back to South Africa many times. He went not only to fight against the system of racial separation. He went to show the oppressed children of the country that he was a successful black man. Former South African President Nelson Mandela spent twenty-seven years in prison. After his release, the first person Mandela asked to see during his visit to the United States was Arthur Ashe.

VOICE ONE:

Ashe used his fame to help increase public knowledge of racism in America. He told reporters how the color of his skin kept him out of tennis games as a boy in Richmond. He spoke against black separatism. He wanted to unite the races, not separate them.

During his travels with the United States Davis Cup team, he said, "People in other countries read a lot about race troubles in the United States. But when they see two guys from the South like Cliff Richey and me, one white and one colored, both sharing a room and being close friends, it must do a little good."

(MUSIC)

VOICE TWO:

In nineteen seventy-seven, Arthur Ashe married Jeanne Moutoussamy. They shared a deep concern for others. Ashe always urged people to do their best -- even his opponents. To help others, he started an organization, the Safe Passage Foundation. It helped poor children develop the skills to learn. And it taught them how to play tennis and golf.

VOICE ONE:

In nineteen seventy-nine, Ashe felt severe pain in his chest. He had suffered his first heart attack, even though he seemed in excellent physical condition. His days of playing tennis were over.

Doctors operated on him later that year to try to improve the flow of blood from his heart. But his physical activity was very limited. Four years later, he had to have another operation.

VOICE TWO:

Now that he could not be active in sports, he took on new responsibilities. He helped the American Heart Association educate the public about heart disease. He wrote books. And, in nineteen eighty-six, he became a father when his wife Jeanne gave birth to their daughter, Camera.

Two years later, Arthur Ashe faced his final struggle. He discovered he had the virus that causes the disease AIDS. He and his doctors believed he had gotten it when he received infected blood after his second heart operation. He kept the bad news a secret for more than three years. He did not want his daughter to know. But reporters found out about his condition in nineteen ninety-two. He decided to tell the public.

VOICE ONE:

Ashe continued to work even though he was weak from the disease. During his last ten months of life, he continued to help children. He also demonstrated to support Haitian refugees, continued to fight racial injustice and battled AIDS. He said, ". . . Living with AIDS is not the greatest burden I've had in my life. Being black is." He gave his last speech the week he died. He said, "AIDS killed my body, but racism is harder to bear. It kills the soul."

Arthur Ashe died in nineteen ninety-three. He was forty-nine years old. He had told a friend, "You come to realize that life is short, and you have to step up. Don't feel sorry for me. Much is expected of those who are strong."

(MUSIC)

VOICE TWO:

This program was written by Vivian Chakarian. It was produced by Lawan Davis. I'm Steve Ember.

VOICE ONE:

And I'm Barbara Klein. Join us again next week for People in America in VOA Special English.