

Part IX - Loser Takes All

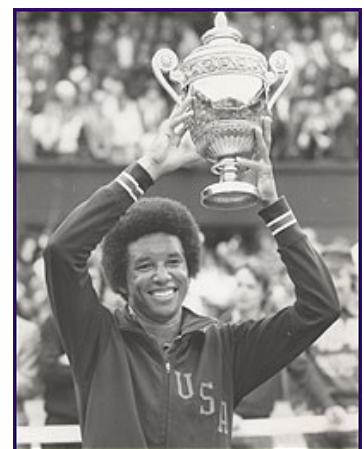
In April of 1968 the Open era had taken off in the rather unglamorous confines of the British Hard Court championships at Bournemouth. By the time the first French and Wimbledon championships had been played, all the fans were talking about the success of the 'Open.'

Now all eyes turned to the United States, for what would be the biggest prize of the season. The prize of 14,000 dollars for the men's singles winner may not sound a lot of money by today's standards, but in 1968 this was a very attractive pot for any player to win, especially for an amateur player. One such amateur in the tournament was a young black American lieutenant who was serving in the U.S. army called Arthur Ashe. Keen to represent his country in Davis Cup matches, Arthur remained in the US army and did not turn professional, as at this time the requirement for Davis Cup players was that they had to be amateurs. Arthur had a great tournament and won through to meet the 'Flying Dutchman' Tom Okker in the men's final. Arthur Ashe made history on Monday 9th September on the lawns of Forest Hills, beating Okker, 14-12, 5-7, 6-3, 3-6, 6-3 and becoming the first winner of the US Open and the first ever black man to win the United States title. At this time the United States Tennis Association was still completely confused by the whole amateur-professional status and at a very late hour made the decision that amateurs couldn't receive prize money and duly presented the 14,000 dollar winners cheque to the loser Tom Okker. For winning the tournament and his patriotism to play Davis Cup matches, Arthur Ashe left the tournament empty handed. Richard Evans in his book *Open Tennis* wrote, 'The sporting world acclaimed a new hero today but also laughed at the absurdity of a sport that gave the loser the prize money and the winner nothing.'

Arthur Ashe went on to make pioneering tennis tours in 1970 and in 1971 to Africa looking for tennis talent. During one of these tours he discovered a 10 year-old future star of the game in Cameroon, and arranged for him to attend the French Federation Academy in Nice. His name was Yannick Noah. Noah went on to take 22 titles and deliver a serve that wouldn't be out of place on today's professional circuit. With French nationality, he won the 1983 French Open, the first home winner since 1946 and no Frenchman has won it since. After his tennis career he took up music and became a pop star.

In 1975 I remember watching Arthur play in his first round match at the Wimbledon Championships and remarking at the time how very sharp his game seemed. He had a great tournament and went on to convincingly beat the previous year's champion and fellow country man, Jimmy Connors 6-1, 6-1, 5-7, 6-4. The following year in 1976 Arthur spearheaded a World Championship Tennis tour in Nigeria and gave Africa its first professional tournament.

This was in a time when the place of apartheid in sport was being very strongly debated and where demonstrations followed South African and Rhodesian sportsmen all around the world. Tennis would not be exempted. In 1968 a match between Sweden and Rhodesia had to be stopped when a 1,500 strong rioting mob, some armed with iron bars, lumps of concrete and bottles, made play impossible. The match was completed after being moved to a club very familiar to several of us High Wycombe players, Bandol Tennis Club in the south of France.



Arthur Ashe

Arthur later become the spokesperson for the Tennis Players Association and then in 1993 aged only 49, tragically died of AIDS after receiving a blood transfusion. The death of this wonderful ambassador to our sport was to be a tragic loss to the game.

Next Month : Part X - A New Tennis Star is Bjorn