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Ashe's Legacy Is the Gift for Inspiration

By IRA BERKOW

There can be no greater gift than that of holding out hope for those who have felt hopeless. Arthur Ashe possessed that rare gift, the ability to inspire. On Saturday, at 3:13 P.M. in a room in New York Hospital, Arthur Ashe died at age 49.

It is not stretching a point to say that his gift lives on. Few men or women leave such a legacy; Arthur Ashe was one such extraordinary human being.

"The more I read about the world of tennis, and Arthur Ashe's role in it, the more I began to dream of its possibilities," Mark Mathabane wrote in his autobiography, Kaffir Boy, recalling the period around 1970 when he was a young black child living under the tyranny of apartheid in South Africa.

Mathabane had discovered tennis after having been given an old wood racquet by a white woman he worked for.

"What if I too were someday to attain the same fame and fortune as Arthur Ashe?" Mathabane wrote. "Would whites respect me as they did him? Would I be as free as he? The dreams were tantalizing, but I knew they were only dreams. Nevertheless, I kept dreaming; after all, what harm could that do me?"

Ashe, by his intelligence, his dignity, his courage and his commitment, fought fights on several fronts, most recently against AIDS, which it is believed he contracted from a blood transfusion during a heart operation 10 years ago.

He organized the Arthur Ashe Foundation for the Defeat of AIDS. But he also battled for an end to discrimination, in regard not just to race but to gender as well.

"He was a voice for all the minorities," Pam Shriver, a tennis player, said yesterday. "And that goes for women, too. He brought a level of conscience to the game, whether he was speaking on South Africa or inner-city minorities or exclusionary policies any place. Arthur's influence on tennis didn't fade after he left the sport."

Ashe retired as an active tennis player in 1980, after a brief comeback after he had suffered a heart attack. The fact that he was the first black man to win the United States Open, in 1968, and Wimbledon, in 1975 --

he is still the only black man to have won either event -- was the crown of his tennis career. But the hope he offered many by all of his achievements was perhaps an even greater glory.

"He's always been, for black players, someone to look up to and someone who says, 'You can do it; it doesn't matter where you come from or how you look,' " said Zina Garrison-Jackson, a black woman from Houston who is a prominent tennis competitor.

Ashe sought to bring light into the darkness of ignorance by virtue of education, and he often rankled some.

"I have become convinced," he said, "that we blacks spend too much time on the playing field and too little in the libraries."

Ashe also understood that athletics were often a way to gain the attention of young people, in order that they might indeed embrace education. He helped start the Safe Passage Foundation, a concept under which youths could achieve a productive adult life by combining sports and academics. It took root in about eight cities, from Kansas City, Mo., to Newark.

As of January, in Newark alone, 1,870 students -- two-thirds of them between the ages of 4 and 13 -- were being taught golf, tennis and fencing, and being made to understand the significance of education.

"He touched the lives of thousands of children and young people by encouraging them to stay in school and to play tennis, which he viewed as a lifetime sport," said Mayor Sharpe James of Newark.

Ashe was also the author of a three-volume book on the history of blacks in sports, A Hard Road to Glory, published in 1988. It is a scholarly work, and it suited Ashe's bent: A graduate of U.C.L.A., he once said that had he not been a professional tennis player, he might have become a college English or philosophy professor.

While Ashe played tennis to win, and played for money, he still maintained principles. One can't remember Ashe behaving other than as a gentleman. He said he admired the Greek athletic ideal, "a level that really was to be exalted." But Ashe was realistic enough to know "that this wasn't always the case."

Ashe also understood that he was often the focal point in a tennis setting, often the lone black in a sea of white. He was a symbol and a role model, whether he wished to be or not. Nevertheless, he took seriously this position that had been thrust upon him.

Ashe remembered where he came from, Richmond, where as a boy he was not allowed to play in tournaments with whites. And he remembered why he had one tennis idol, Pancho Gonzalez, an outsider like himself.

And he always remembered and adhered to the advice his grandmother once gave him: "Never embarrass yourself."

In his early years as a tennis standout, Ashe appeared shy and reluctant to take stands. It seemed enough for him to make his way up the ladder of the game, without having to combat the social issues. But he soon became involved. In 1970, for example, he began a publicized and controversial campaign to obtain a visa to play tennis in South Africa. When the South African Government turned him down, solely because of his color, Ashe was angered.

At a news conference in London, he said that he would "like to drop the H-bomb on Johannesburg," where the South African Open was held. Some -- including a friend and rival of Ashe's, Rod Laver -- thought this was going too far.

"I don't think that was a very helpful thing to say," Laver said at the time. "I've never felt you should mix sports and politics."

But Ashe's stand was inspiring for others, like Mathabane, the young South African, who did become a promising junior player.

In 1973, Ashe got the visa to South Africa.

"His coming meant so much to blacks in South Africa, who literally worshipped American blacks who proved that they could triumph in a white man's world, a world that many of us believed was booby-trapped with all sorts of obstacles designed to sink blacks deeper into the mire of squalor and servitude, where white people wanted them to belong," wrote Mathabane, who with particular help from Stan Smith, one of Ashe's best friends, left South Africa in 1978 with a tennis scholarship to Limestone College in Gaffney, S.C.

Another young player was literally discovered in Africa by Ashe, at a tennis clinic in Cameroon, and went on to compete at tennis's highest level.

Yesterday, that player, Yannick Noah, said:

"It was thanks to him that I could have a career in tennis. It was him who, when I was young, gave me the dream."

Ashe continued his fight to end apartheid in South Africa, and when Nelson Mandela was released from prison and journeyed to the United States, the first person he wanted to meet was Arthur Ashe.

Just five months ago, Ashe was arrested in Washington while taking part in a demonstration against the United States' treatment of Haitian refugees. Humble Approach

About his role as a leader, and particularly as a black leader, Ashe once said:

"Others are more important, more cosmic, and whereas I don't see myself as Jackie Robinson or even a Rosa Parks, neither a trail blazer nor a pawn of history, I do think I'm just a little bit of progress."

"He was being humble when he said that," the Rev. Jesse Jackson said yesterday. "But Arthur Ashe was in that tradition of great leaders. He earned that status not by proclaiming it, but by living it."

Time, meanwhile, will determine Ashe's role in history, and his legacy. From here, it looks considerable.