Chapter

4

Tennis

The Sport of Kings

Before horse racing assumed the title of "the sport of kings" in the mid-1700s, tennis lay claim to that category. The French called it *tenez* and played their version indoors. The English followed in turn and, depending on which sets of rules were followed, it was referred to more properly as *real tennis* or *court tennis*. In 1415, Charles, Duke of Orleans, played tennis while imprisoned by the English after the Battle of Agincourt. King Henry VIII was an avid player.

The English brought it outdoors, changed the court dimensions, and eventually Mary Outerbridge brought the sport to America in 1874. The first national tournament was held in 1881 at Newport, Rhode Island, and the entries were predominantly the members of elite private clubs of the Northeast. No blacks or socially outcast players were permitted but, by 1890, several professional black families had built courts on their properties.

There were no public courts in the 1890s and it had little appeal to working class folk. Players traditionally dressed in all-white with the men in flannel pants, long-sleeved shirts, and ties. The women wore long ankle-length full skirts and blouses up to the neck. Their shoes were leather-soled and high-topped. Most courts were of closely cut grass that required steady maintenance. Tennis, along with crew and golf, was identified with the upper classes and strictly for amateurs. The United States National Lawn Tennis Association (USNLTA), its governing body, meant to keep it just the way it began.

Tennis among blacks took root at the Ivy League colleges where the well-to-do sent their children—if they could get in. Eventually the campuses of Howard University, Lincoln University, Tuskegee Institute (now Tuskegee University), and others had courts for their faculty. Records at Tuskegee show tournaments were held there as early as 1895. The organizers were E.T. Atwell, Emmett J. Scott, Warren Logan, and S.E. Courtney.

Not to be outdone, enterprising blacks in Philadelphia held a tournament in 1898 which was won by Thomas Jefferson of Lincoln University. The Philadelphia contingent, headed by Reverend W.W. Walker, had also invited fellow blacks from Washington, D.C., to compete in team play in 1898 and 1899. The Washington, D.C., group, led by Dr. Henry Freeman, went down to defeat. One of Freeman's members

was Charles C. Cook, Howard University's first football coach who had attended Cornell University.

By the first decade of this century, professional blacks along the East Coast had formed clubs and were playing regular intercity matches. Socially prominent blacks found tennis an ideal sport and encouraged their children to learn. Teachers, preachers, professors, doctors, lawyers, dentists, and merchants sought refuge in fraternal and sororal associations at their local courts. Out in Chicago, Mrs. C.O. "Mother" Seames, a legendary figure in tennis circles there, began teaching on a single court at the turn of the century.

The equipment then was quite crude and expensive by today's standards. The rackets were wooden and unwieldy with large bare handles (no leather grips), the strings were thicker and they loosened considerably as time passed. The balls were slightly smaller and lost their fuzzy nap much sooner, even though most courts were grass. Courts used by blacks, however, were nearly always made of clay. On a typical tennis outing, players had to even bring a net to the site as few were permanently provided.

By 1910, the black press reported on the doings of the Monumental Club of Washington, D.C.; the Chautauqua Tennis Club in Philadelphia; the Flushing Tennis Club of New York City; and others in Wilmington, Delaware; New Rochelle, New York; New Haven, Connecticut; Annapolis, Maryland; Atlanta; Durham, North Carolina; Charleston, South Carolina; and New Orleans. That same year, the members of the Washington, D.C., YMCA team conducted a traveling tour of several cities to show the rudiments of the game to interested groups. Play in the Far West and Midwest seemed limited as Edwin B. Henderson noted that there was "...only one court available to colored citizens..."[1] in St. Louis, Missouri.

Among the Washington, D.C., troupe was John F.N. Wilkinson, who was the best player between 1910 and World War I. Other names that appear as having exceptional records were Rev. Walker, Edgar Brown, Henry Freeman, E.J. Ridgely, Ralph Cook (Charles' brother), H. Stanton McCard, Gerald F. Norman, Daisy Reed, Dora Cole Norman, and Lucy Diggs Slowe. Dora Cole Norman was also the best basketball player in her day and Miss Slowe eventually became dean of women at Howard University.

On the eve of World War I, Edwin B. Henderson and Roscoe C. Bruce, the new assistant superintendent of Colored Schools of Washington, D.C., had introduced the sport to some public school youngsters and black colleges were playing informal matches. Virginia Union, Hampton Institute (now Hampton University), Howard, and Atlanta University had the best teams. Enough sustained interest seemed present to form a national body to cultivate even more interest in the black community. The result was the formation of the American Tennis Association (ATA). It became the oldest, continuously operated black sports group in the country, outside of collegiate circles.

The American Tennis Association

In 1916, the Association Tennis Club of Washington, D.C., invited local players and

those from Baltimore to form a national body. The initial attendees at the ATA's formation were Henry Freeman, John F.N. Wilkinson, and Talley Holmes from Washington, D.C., and H. Stanton McCard, William H. Wright, B.M. Rhetta, and Ralph Cook from Baltimore. McCard was elected president and Gerald Norman of the Ideal Tennis Club in New York was executive secretary.

The ATA had four goals: to develop tennis among black people in the United States; to encourage the formation of clubs and the building of courts; to encourage the formation of local associations; and to encourage and develop junior players. To that end and to inaugurate its efforts, the first ATA Nationals were held at Baltimore's Druid Hill Park courts, in August 1917. Twenty-three clubs sent players and from the thirty-nine entries, Talley Holmes emerged the winner of the Men's Singles. The first Women's winner was Lucy Diggs Slowe. Miss Diggs thus became the first black female national champion in any sport. Junior Singles and Women's Doubles did not begin until 1924.

In spite of the success of the ATA, tennis remained confined to the black professional classes and collegians. A survey was made in 1926 which showed little or no interest from fifty-six of seventy colleges queried, only thirty-six schools with courts, and only four of them with coaches. Dr. Elwood Downing of Roanoke, Virginia; Charles Williams of Hampton's faculty; and Cleveland Abbott at Tuskegee helped remedy this shortcoming.

The best opportunities came at white colleges with their superior facilities, tough competition, and quality coaching. Four blacks played on these varsity squads before the Depression: Richard Hudlin at the University of Chicago; Douglas Turner at the University of Illinois; Henry Graham at Michigan; and Reginald Weir at the City College of New York (CCNY). Hudlin was captain of his team in 1927, Turner was runner-up in the Big Ten Championships in 1929; and Weir was captain three years running at CCNY.

In 1929, the ATA and the USNLTA had its first confrontation over the entries of Weir and Gerald Norman, Jr. in the USNLTA's Junior Indoor event at New York City's seventh Regiment Armory. Relations between the two groups had been cordial until then. In 1921, Dwight F. Davis, the donor of the Davis Cup and the secretary of war, had umpired a semi-final match at the ATA Nationals. But the USNLTA had an unwritten rule barring blacks from participation. Now, however, some blacks were good enough to compete with the best around.

Weir and Norman had paid their one dollar entry fee and showed up to play. When informed that his son could not participate, Norman's father, Gerald Sr., complained to the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). The NAACP assistant secretary, Robert Bagnoll, complained but received the following reply: "...the policy of the USLTA [they had deleted the word "National" from their title] 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 method of separate associations...should be continued."[2] Neither Weir nor Norman played.

It is interesting that the NAACP was brought into the predicament when very little input from them was forthcoming in other sports like baseball. But tennis was a middle class sport and the NAACP—at the time—had a middle-class following, with virtually all of its officers drawn from the black professional class. The NAACP did not, for instance, try to intercede on behalf of the boxer Harry Wills, who was summarily cut out of his rightful heavyweight title opportunity by Tex Rickard and other boxing authorities.

The denials of Weir and Norman did not disguise the talent in ATA events. Eyre Saitch was one of the best and most athletic of ATA Nationals winners. He was more famous as a member of the famed New York Renaissance basketball team. Among the women, Isadore Channels and Ora Washington were clearly the best yet. Channels won four ATA Nationals crowns between 1922 and 1926. Washington won a record eight crowns between 1929 and 1937. Both Channels and Washington were, like Saitch, star performers on the basketball courts as well.

Washington was so good that Chicago's black paper, the *Chicago Defender*, noted on March 14, 1931, that "Ora Washington, now of Chicago, again holds her position as national champion, having gone through the season without a defeat. We don't even recall her losing a set....Her superiority is so evident that her competitors are frequently beaten before the first ball crosses the net."[3] So complete was the dominance of a few women players that in the first twenty years of the ATA's history, there were only five different winners.

Washington was also quite unorthodox in her approach. She held the racket half way up the handle and seldom took a full swing. But no woman had her foot speed, which she honed while playing basketball for the *Philadelphia Tribune* team. She was clearly the first black female to dominate a sport. Lulu Ballard finally stopped her winning streak in 1936. Completing the list of outstanding female players were Flora Lomax of Detroit and the Peters sisters, Roumania and Margaret. The latter twosome won the ATA Women's Doubles crown a whopping fourteen times, unmatched by any doubles team—male or female.

Ora Washington's reign came during the Depression years of the 1930s, which turned out to be a blessing and a curse for black tennis. The blessing came in the form of more facilities built during President Franklin D. Roosevelt's Works Progress Administration programs. Hundreds of public courts were erected in parks where blacks played. The curse, of course, was that few people had enough resources to do much of anything, let alone play games.

The Depression Years and World War II

With more balanced interest and facilities in more places, the ATA moved its Nationals event to different venues during the 1930s. But soon the courts at Wilberforce College in Ohio became the most centrally located because of the increased entries from Texas, Arkansas, and even California. The Nationals remained east of the Mississippi River, however, until 1975, when they were played in San Diego.

College play greatly enhanced the appeal of ATA events, which fitted in neatly with the group's middle-class orientation. Interest had expanded since the end of World War I, and the Colored (Now Central) Intercollegiate Athletic Association (CIAA) was by far the strongest conference. Smith, Morgan State, Howard, and St. Augustine all won titles during the 1930s and 1940s. The Midwestern Athletic Association (MWAA), the Southwest Athletic Conference (SWAC), the South Central Athletic Conference (SCAC), and the Eastern Intercollegiate Athletic Conference (EIAC) fielded mediocre teams at best. The talent in the clubs and in the collegiate ranks remained in the Northeast though Tuskegee was an exception.

Tuskegee compiled the best record of any black school in any sport on the tennis courts but, in truth, their competition was woefully inadequate. They had a club team beginning in 1909 and their coach, Cleveland Abbott, became an ATA president. They also had two courts built exclusively for women staff and students. When the ATA Nationals were held there in 1931, fourteen courts were in place with a covered grandstand for 1,000 people. Quite an achievement in the Depression. The other solid southern team was at Xavier University in New Orleans, thereby taking advantage of that city's long history of blacks in sports. The SWAC did not even have a conference championship until 1942.

To capitalize on the growing interest, the ATA, at its 1937 annual meeting, arranged an exhibition tour for some of its best players at schools and colleges. Starting on February 4, 1938, Lulu Ballard, Ernest McCampbell and others visited twenty-one colleges and eight high schools in a journey that must rank as a noble effort to upgrade black tennis across the eastern half of the country. That there were possible rewards in the offing (for those who heeded their advice) came in the form of a continuing black presence on some white college varsities. Dan Kean had played at Michigan in 1933 and Maceo Hill was at Ohio State that same year.

The styles of play of players like Kean and Hill had changed considerably since the era of Rev. Walker and Henry Freeman. Early participants used lots of chops and spins and the next wave of players made better use of the power derived from better equipment. By 1930, the best black players were copying the best white players in strokes and swings. Although white players could not be seen at events held at private clubs, they could be viewed at places like the seventh Regiment Armory in New York City.

The Jackson brothers, Nathaniel and Franklin, were baseline experts like the legendary Don Budge, the white champion, and well-coached by Cleveland Abbott. They dominated the ATA Doubles events in the 1930s. Jimmy McDaniel was the first good player from California. Beginning in 1939 he won four ATA crowns. His style, as opposed to that of Kean, Hill, and the Jackson brothers, was the serve-and-volley variety developed on the fast cement courts in Los Angeles. California had few if any slow clay courts, so their players played very aggressive tennis. McDaniel was so impressive that he was involved in an his-

toric interracial exhibition in July 1940 with Budge, winner of the four major world titles in 1938.

This exhibition took place at the Cosmopolitan Tennis Club on Convent Avenue in Harlem, New York. Budge won 6–1, 6–2 on the club's best clay court in front of the largest crowd ever to watch a match there. Sandwiched as it was among tall apartment buildings, the club could not hold all who wanted to witness this historic happening, but it was the best that Harlem had to offer at the time. After the singles, Budge and Reginald Weir played a doubles match against McDaniel and Richard Cohen, the reigning ATA champions.

While Budge's appearance was certainly inspirational and appreciated, blacks were still *persona non grata* at the USLTA Nationals at the West Side Tennis Club at Forest Hills, New York. Of the ATA Nationals winners, only Lloyd Scott and the 1950 champion, Oscar Johnson of Los Angeles, had practiced regularly against whites. Said Johnson of that period: "At the time, blacks were literally not allowed to play in tournaments against whites. Players before me could not enter...Jimmy McDaniel was very good in his day. The only encounter...he had playing against a white was in a tournament in New York, an all-black tournament."[4] However, McDaniel and Johnson were not the only eminently qualified players to face discrimination.

Pressures were mounting nonetheless for the USLTA to admit blacks to its sanctioned events. After World War II, the most important breakthrough came from an unlikely source—a street-smart, lower-middle-class female named Althea Gibson. She and Johnson would force the USLTA to amend its tournament entry policies and lead a new wave of black players who went to the very top of the rankings.

Notes

1. Henderson, *The Negro in Sports*, p. 312.
2. *Montgomery Advertiser*, 28 December 1929.
3. *Chicago Defender*, 14 March 1931.
4. *Tennis West Magazine*, March 1984, p. 140.