

This Day in History... July 10, 1943

Birth of Arthur Ashe

Arthur Robert Ashe Jr. was born on July 10, 1943, in Richmond, Virginia. Ashe was the first and only African American ranked as the world's #1 tennis player, with over 800 career wins, including three Grand Slam singles titles.

Ashe's father was the caretaker and policeman for Richmond's recreation department and the family lived in the caretaker's cottage at Brookfield Park, the largest blacks-only public park in the city. Ashe began playing tennis in the park when he was seven years old and found he had a natural talent for the sport. It was there he was discovered by Ron Charity, the best black tennis player in the city. Charity began teaching Ashe more about the sport and suggested he participate in local tournaments.

When Ashe was in high school, Charity introduced him to Robert Walter Johnson, Althea Gibson's coach. Johnson mentored Ashe for seven years, fostering the ideals of sportsmanship and etiquette that would later define his career. In 1958 he played in his first integrated tennis competition in Maryland. Ashe spent his senior year of high school in St. Louis, where he had more opportunities to compete. He was featured in *Sports Illustrated* in 1960 and 1963 in their *Faces in the Crowd* stories.

After becoming the first African American to win the National Junior Indoor tennis title, Ashe earned a scholarship to the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA). He also joined the ROTC to help pay his tuition. After graduation, he joined the Army in 1966 and spent two years as a data processor at West Point, where he also led the school's tennis program.

In 1963, Ashe was the first African American named to the US Davis Cup team. Two years later he was ranked the number three player in the country and won the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) singles and doubles title, helping UCLA win the NCAA tennis championship. In 1968, Ashe became the first Black man to win the US Open. He also won the amateur national championship that year, making him the first player to win both in the same year.

Ashe attempted to compete in the South African Open, but was denied a visa because of apartheid. He applied and was denied several times over the next few years and spoke out about his discrimination in the calls for sanctions.

Ashe became a chairman for the American Heart Association following his two heart surgeries

Ashe became the first non-Australian since 1959 to win the Australian Open in 1970. He lost it the following year but did win that year's men's doubles competition at the French Open. He competed in his second US Open in 1972, but lost. That year he also supported the creation of the Association of Tennis Professionals and became its president in 1974. In 1973 he was finally permitted to compete in the South African Open. However, after witnessing discrimination there first-hand, he supported the boycotts against the country's participation in tennis tournaments.

Ashe won his third Grand Slam singles title in 1975, becoming the first Black man to win at Wimbledon. He beat Jimmy Connors, who had won all their previous contests. Ashe went on to win the Australian Open doubles tournament in 1977. He required heel surgery in 1977 and heart surgery in 1979, after which he officially retired on April 16, 1980. In a 10-year professional career, Ashe had 818 wins, 260 losses, and won 51 titles.

After leaving the game, Ashe wrote for *Time* magazine and the *Washington Post* and provided commentary for ABC and HBO. He founded the National Junior Tennis League and was captain of the US Davis Cup team from 1981 to 1985. In retirement, Ashe demonstrated against South African apartheid and against US treatment of Haitian refugees.

Despite his outward good health, Ashe needed a second heart surgery in 1983. His ongoing heart issues helped to raise awareness of the hereditary aspect of heart disease – both of his parents had suffered from it. After the surgery, Ashe became a national chairman for the American Heart Association.

A few years later, Ashe went to the hospital after experiencing paralysis in his right arm. It was discovered that he had been infected with HIV, likely from a blood transfusion during his heart surgery. While he initially kept his diagnosis private, Ashe announced it to the public in 1992. He then created the Arthur Ashe Foundation for the Defeat of AIDS and became a spokesman for the research and treatment of AIDS.

In 1992, Ashe founded the Arthur Ashe Institute for Urban Health, prompting *Sports Illustrated* magazine to name him its Sportsman of the Year. Ashe died from AIDS-related pneumonia the following year on February 6, 1993, at the age of 49. After his death, Ashe was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom. He received many awards and honors during his life and after his death and several sports and education venues have been named in his honor.



Ashe was the 10th honoree in the American Sports Series.



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