



# Arthur Ashe: Tennis and Justice in the Civil Rights Era

*Eric Allen Hall*

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*Arthur Ashe* explains how this iconic African American tennis player overcame racial and class barriers to reach the top of the tennis world in the 1960s and 1970s. But more important, it follows Ashe's evolution as an activist who had to contend with the shift from civil rights to Black Power. Off the court, and in the arena of international politics, Ashe positioned himself at the center of the black freedom movement, negotiating the poles of black nationalism and assimilation into white society. Fiercely independent and protective of his public image, he navigated the thin line between conservatives and liberals, reactionaries and radicals, the sports establishment and the black cause.

Eric Allen Hall's work examines Ashe's life as a struggle against adversity but also a negotiation between the comforts—perhaps requirements—of tennis-star status and the felt obligation to protest the discriminatory barriers the white world constructed to keep black people "in their place." Ashe lived a peculiarly difficult moral life, the personal and political producing exquisite conflict. White society expected him to be grateful; black militants scolded him for not being radical enough. He broke racial taboos by playing tennis in Dixie and in South Africa, but he valued his privacy and shunned extremism.

Ashe forced positive change in the United States and South Africa with an approach that borrowed from both the civil rights and the Black Power movements. After a severe heart attack in 1979, he stopped playing professional tennis but maintained a visible public profile as coach of the U.S. Davis Cup team, antiapartheid activist, and author of *A Hard Road to Glory*, the first published synthesis of African American sports history. A fierce guardian of his private life, Ashe was forced to publicly acknowledge that he was ill with AIDS—having become infected with HIV from a blood transfusion following coronary bypass surgery in 1983. He died of the disease in 1993.

Drawing on coverage of Ashe's athletic career and social activism in domestic and international publications, archives including the Ashe Papers, and a variety of published memoirs and interviews, Hall has created an intimate, nuanced portrait of a great athlete who stood at the crossroads of sports and equal justice.

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