

# EBONY SPORTS TENNIS

# CHAMPIONSHIP



gettyimages  
AFP

▶ SERENA WILLIAMS IS A QUEEN OF THE TENNIS COURT who has won major tournaments many times over. But one moment in particular went down both in sport and in fashion history. It was 2002, at the U.S. Open in Flushing, N.Y. Over the course of two weeks as Williams served her way to the title, critics and fans alike incessantly discussed her hair, her muscles, her swing, her grunts and her clothes. Tennis should be about the sport and about the win, but we know that when a sister comes to play, it also becomes about her body and choice of sports apparel. Williams slayed all the commentators by winning the tournament while rocking an ultratight, supershort black catsuit that, like the young woman wearing it, challenged the White establishment's idea of what tennis was supposed to look

Whenever we decide to enter a sport, we tend to dominate it. Think, basketball and Michael Jordan. Football and Emmitt Smith. Golf and Tiger Woods. And when it comes to the grass, hard and clay courts, Black names and accolades go just as long. From Althea Gibson to the up-and-comers, EBONY looks at our long love affair with tennis.

BY WILLIAM BRYANT MILES

like. It was a singular OMG moment for the sport and since then, ten-nis fashions have never been the same. Neither has the game. In 2013, while at a press conference for an Argentinean exhibition, Williams stood next to her also supremely talented sister, Venus, and famously said: "We changed tennis."

That wasn't bravado or a stretch. It was the truth. Serena said what we already knew was true: When Black folks get involved, a change is gonna come. Case in point? Not only is Serena one of the best in history, but that black catsuit is now memorialized in the museum at the International Tennis Hall of Fame in Newport, R.I. And given that summer adds emphasis to the tennis season, what better time than now to get reacquainted with the stars who have ushered in the change?



**1916**  
The American Tennis Association is founded to create tournaments for Black players, who were barred from playing in mainstream tournaments.



**1956-1958**  
Althea Gibson wins the French Open, then two consecutive Wimbledon and U.S. Open championships.

**1968-1975**  
Arthur Ashe wins U.S. Open, Australian Open and Wimbledon titles.



**1983**  
Frenchman Yannick Noah, wins the French Open.



**1988**  
Zina Garrison wins two Olympic medals for the United States, bronze for singles, and gold for doubles (partnered with Pam Shriver), in Seoul, South Korea.

**1994**  
Lori McNeil upsets Steffi Graf, the reigning Wimbledon champion, in the first round of the tournament. McNeil would ultimately make it to the semifinals.

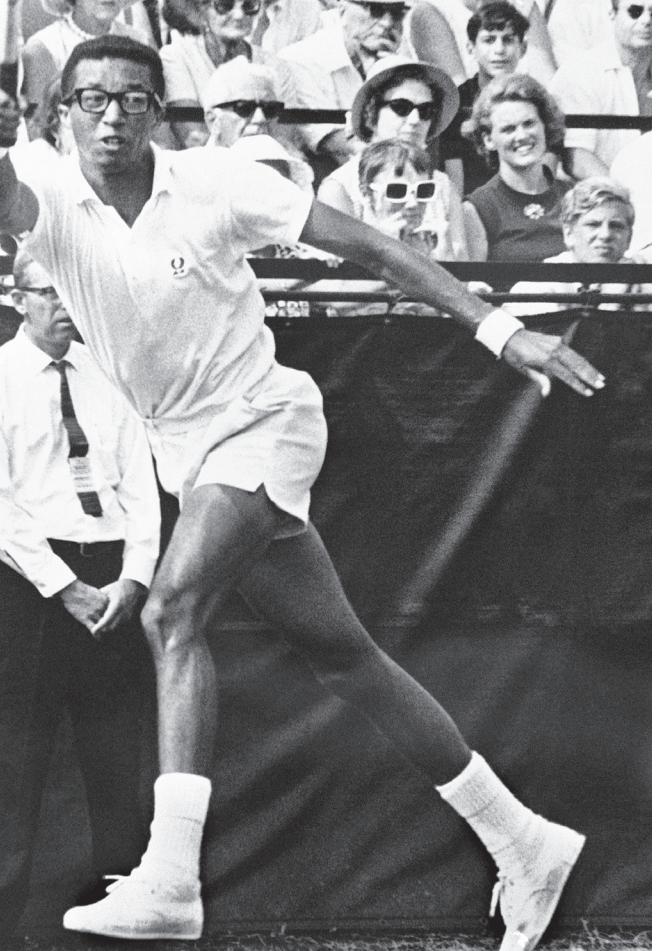
## Going Way Back(hand): Blacks, Tennis and the 20th Century

At the dawn of the last century, tennis, a sport introduced to the United States in 1874, was enjoyed by African-Americans recreationally and offered at some Black universities, Howard and Tuskegee among them. In keeping with the oppressive times, however, Blacks were not allowed to officially compete against Whites, and in 1916, several Black clubs united to create the American Tennis Association (ATA) as a way to generate opportunities for our people to play competitively.

"The ATA was synonymous with the Negro Leagues in baseball; it was the only conduit for African-Americans to get exposed to competitive tennis," says Albert Tucker, a former ATA executive director.

As the popularity of the sport progressed, there would be many great players, but none more renowned than Althea Gibson, a tall, lithe player raised in Harlem. At age 28, she demolished barriers when she became the first Black person to win a Grand Slam (one of the world's largest tournaments: the Australian, French and U.S. Opens and Wimbledon), taking the women's singles title at the 1956 French Open. It was the first of 11 Grand Slam singles and doubles trophies she would claim. Tucker places this achievement in historical context, "[When Gibson won the French Open], she showed that we can compete at the national and international levels. It gave hope for individuals—it said, 'we've arrived.' It was like the Tiger Woods moment in golf." Gibson's accomplishments would pave the way for a young man who would rise to prominence in the following decade.

Arthur Ashe, the soft-spoken but determined Richmond, Va., native, rose to prominence on the men's tour in the 1960s, ultimately winning three of the four Grand Slams (the Australian and U.S. Opens and Wimbledon), among other titles. Akin to Jackie Robinson in baseball and countless other Black sports pioneers, Ashe gained respect for both his athletic skills and his deep commitment to social justice and humanitarian causes. A prominent member of the Kappa Alpha Psi fraternity, Ashe once explained his passion for public service in this oft-quoted statement: "I know I could never forgive myself if I elected to live without humane purpose, without trying to help the poor and unfortunate, without recognizing that perhaps the purest joy in life comes with trying to help others." By the time he died in 1993, he had given to countless causes, including constructing a tennis facility in Soweto, South Africa, for Blacks who could not play in White establishments during the apartheid era. State-side, his legacy lives forever: The stadium where the U.S. Open is played is named for him, and a



bronze statue bearing his image is at the South Gate entrance.

## The Williams Sisters Era: Blacker and Bolder

Throughout the 1980s and early 1990s, there were Black champions from the U.S. and abroad, namely American Zina Garrison and Yannick Noah from France, but none as prominent as Gibson and Ashe. That was until a 14-year-old Venus Williams, sporting a head full of beaded braids, swung her racquet in her first professional match in 1994. She inadvertently changed the game and ultimately thrusted open more doors for Blacks in the sport than she likely could've fathomed. With younger sister and powerhouse Serena right behind her, the pair, coached by their father, Richard Williams, stormed onto the tennis scene, proudly Black in their aesthetic and demeanor—and undeniably competent on court.

Their vibrant and rebellious fashion aesthetic both insulted and enticed critics who were accustomed to a more staid approach from play-

ers. Their hairstyles and the outfits only served as the spirited backdrop for the real party trick: a brutally aggressive, athletic style of play that, 20 years later, is now the standard for the game. "When the Williamses arrived, every major tennis commentator said they wouldn't make it. But everything they said wouldn't happen, happened tenfold," says Tucker, reflectively. "The Williamses set a new tone that said, 'We don't have to do it the traditional way; we can do it our way.'"

Just as Ashe and Gibson had done earlier, Venus and Serena have sculpted careers that will likely reverberate throughout tennis culture forever. The elder Williams made two moves that were especially pivotal in the campaign for women's wage equality in sports: signing an unprecedented \$40-million endorsement deal with Reebok in 2000, and leading the charge to end the male-female prize money gap at Wimbledon in 2007.

For two decades, the sisters have been peerless in their accomplishments, and they hold many records. For example, that Serena still has the most Grand Slam and tour titles of any active player,

Sandania sam debis dit restet rem autemodic tem facit endigent reperrum rectat. Officim hil et ent aut odit enim aces di debissum eos aceperum isclit atiunt. Genditat. Luptur aut et laboratio officestis quisinv endiat conse ditat volore cumendellam quia vel eium aut omnis modi



and Venus trails just behind her in second place on both lists. Yet these impressive stats sometimes eclipse the fact that while awe-inspiring, even in their earlier years, they were certainly not the only modern Black players to achieve success on the professional tennis circuit. In the sisters' formative years as pros, they faced competition from Chanda Rubin, an effective player once ranked inside the world's top 10 in both singles and doubles by the Women's Tennis Association (WTA). And James Blake was ranked as high as No. 4 in the world by the Association of Tennis Professionals (ATP), the organization responsible for global rankings in men's tennis. Like Ashe, Blake was respected as much for his work with a racquet as for his charitable donations and off-court endeavors.

This is a thrilling time for African-Americans who love tennis to be front and center. And for the new wave of Black players firmly standing on this rich legacy, there couldn't be a better time to elevate the game. ■

## New Balls, Please: The Next Generation

The list of current players is brimming with Blacks from all over the world. Frenchmen Jo-Wilfried Tsonga, 30, and Gael Monfils, 28, are ranked inside the top 20 in the world and bring unique styles of play. Tsonga nearly missed a Grand Slam win, having reached the finals of the Australian Open in 2008. Monfils has created a name for himself as a flashy player, regularly dazzling audiences with trick shots and gravity-defying leaps. Most recently, African-American women have taken center stage again, with a trio of young players taking on the Williams sisters in Grand Slam competition.

Sloane Stephens, 22, a burgeoning star, has the distinction of having beaten Serena during the 2013 Australian Open quarterfinals. The youngest of this emerging group, Taylor Townsend, 19, squared off and lost against Serena in the first round of the 2014 U.S. Open. Earlier this year, 20-year-old Madison Keys beat Venus in the quarterfinals at the Australian Open before losing to Serena in the next round. There have been dashed hopes when confronting the Williamses, but this new breed of African-American competitors suggests that in the near future there just might be new heirs to tennis superstardom.

"People have been trying to retire me since I was, like, 25... I'm not getting out of here. I think this year has been a great year for me," Venus said after losing in the third round at Wimbledon last year. "I've had some tough losses, but I've learned a lot from them." The Williams sisters have made it abundantly clear: They don't plan to relinquish their position anytime soon.

Still, the jeweled crown of Black tennis greatness will inevitably pass on. As is the case in all sports, youth eventually prevails. Most recently, teen prodigy Frances Tiafoe, 17, made major headlines in April when he turned professional and signed with Roc Nation Sports, owned by one of rapper and business mogul Jay Z. Tiafoe's new agent, Wajid Syed, is overwhelmingly positive about the partnership, telling The New York Times, "You combine the potential with a kid of his charisma, his attitude, his personality — there's just a lot of synergy."

More than ever, people of all backgrounds now have access to engage with the robust history of Blacks in tennis. When the museum at the International Tennis Hall of Fame reopened earlier this year, it featured a display dedicated to the memorabilia and history of the ATA. And that organization—the oldest African-American sports organization in the nation) has plans to construct the ATA Tennis and Education Complex in Fort Lauderdale, Fla., that will not only serve to educate the public but also to develop the next crop of fresh-faced talent.

This is a thrilling time for African-Americans who love tennis to be front and center. And for the new wave of Black players firmly standing on this rich legacy, there couldn't be a better time to elevate the game. ■

**1996**  
MaliVai Washington reaches the finals of Wimbledon.



**1997**  
The United States Tennis Association erects Arthur Ashe Stadium, the largest tennis-specific stadium in the world.

**2002**  
Venus Williams becomes the first Black female player to be ranked No. 1 by the Women's Tennis Association.

**2003**  
Serena Williams is the first Black woman to win the Australian Open, then goes on to win all four Grand Slam events consecutively, but not in the same calendar year.

**2007**  
American junior player Donald Young wins the Boys' title at Wimbledon.

**2012**  
Taylor Townsend is ranked the No. 1 junior player in the world.

**2015**  
Serena Williams wins the Australian Open for a sixth time, her 19th Grand Slam singles title.

**2015**  
Former WTA Player Katrina Adams is named chairman, president and CEO of the United States Tennis Association, the first time an African-American holds this position.