

Interview with Benny Sims

Session 1 (Feb 19, 2020)

Timed Log

[00:00:00.00]

Sims was born in Beaumont, Texas in 1952. Beaumont is known for football, at one time had 27 players in the NFL, many from African American high schools. Jerry LeVias (first Black player in the Southwest Conference), who integrated the Southwest Conference was from Beaumont. In school Sims played football, baseball, track and basketball. Got into tennis at age 15. Brenda Richards, a teenage athlete and neighbor of Sims suggested that he try tennis. They would make a tennis playing area with string, towels and garbage cans. Sims improved quickly, as he had excelled in other sports. He came from a sports family.

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Sims excelled in tennis and by his sophomore year in high school made it to the semi finals of the district championships and in his junior year made it to the finals. He won in his senior year. He continued to play other sports, was captain of the basketball team. His coach had suggested that he focus on tennis in his senior year, which Sims believes aided him in winning the tennis championship. He started getting tennis scholarships.

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Tennis came natural to Sims. He did not have tennis lessons until he had graduated from college. He had won the ATA (American Tennis Association) national championship when he had his first tennis lesson with Pancho Segura. John Wilkerson, was the captain of the tennis team at Texas Southern University, which Sims attended between 1971-75. He gave Sims guidance and mentoring. Wilkerson later developed a program that offered free lessons to local kids. The program was later moved to MacGregor Park in Houston, where Wilkerson became the head pro in 1971, making him the first African American to be named head pro at a park in the South. Wilkinson won the ATA championship in 1971.

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The integration/segregation of public parks and neighborhoods in Beaumont. Public parks were integrated, but there were class divisions in tennis. The courts that Sims played on with Brenda Richards were near a bar, remembers bringing a broom to sweep away the glass before playing. Sims recalls the different courts he played on during high school and college and the people he met on the courts, particularly four men (Bill James, Cliff Hardeman, John Wilkerson, Cliff Johnson) that were from San Antonio, Texas.

[00:19:58.21]

The significance of Trinity University in San Antonio. The furthest Sims traveled to play and compete in tennis was San Antonio, TX. Sims began to play regionally in 1968, the same time Arthur Ashe was on the national scene. Describes how the tennis network in Texas enabled him to improve his game.

[00:24:42.00]

Sims meets Arthur Ashe in 1972. Word got to Ashe that Wilkinson had become head pro at MacGregor Park. Ashe came to the park to do a clinic with the program. That visit focused

attention on the program and on Wilkinson. Ashe stayed for the afternoon. Remembers Ashe as nice and blended in with the group.

[00:28:37.26]

Although Sims and Ashe's career took different courses, they remained in touch over the years. At the ATA championship in 1971, Sims met Richard Hudlin, who Ashe lived with during his senior year of high school. Hudlin invited them back during that winter to meet with pros, Hudlin offered Sims the opportunity to stay with him in a similar way that he did Ashe. Sims did not go as he had already committed to his college and their tennis program.

[00:32:12.07]

Sims graduates from college in 1975, the year Ashe wins Wimbledon. Ashe was aware of Sims's rise in tennis. In 1976 Ashe was at Wimbledon defending his title. He was in Nottingham for pre-tournament matches and Sims was in Birmingham, UK. Sims came down to Nottingham to meet Ashe at his hotel. Sims was aware of Ashe's injury, they spoke about the game.

[00:36:52.11]

Sims shares a parallel story where he had to defend his title at the ATAs. In 1976 Sims went to Miami and stayed with the Moore family which Ashe had stayed with years earlier when he played the Orange Bowl Championship. Sims explains that Ashe stayed with the Moores, an African American family, because African Americans couldn't stay in local hotels.

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Becoming head pro at Longwood Cricket Club in 1982. Was director of Sportsman Tennis Club previously, which Ashe was a major fundraiser of. Ashe came for a couple of visits, Althea Gibson did clinics.

[00:46:04.05]

Describes the significance of being named head pro of Longwood and that not being lost on Ashe.

[00:46:28.15]

History of Longwood Cricket Club. Longwood is particularly significant because of its association with Dwight Davis and the Davis Cup. Forest Hills (The West Side Tennis Club) and All England Lawn Tennis & Croquet Club were two other significant clubs. Longwood was founded in 1876. These three clubs were defined by the event that they hosted, Longwood the Davis Cup, Forest Hills the US Open and All England Wimbledon. Sims shares the significance of Ashe's name and success at these "old line" clubs.

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In 1983 drives Ashe to an event at Yale where Ashe received an award. Sims would years later go to Yale to attend an event to speak about Ashe with author, Ray Arsenault.

[00:55:19.23]

In 1988 Ashe became Vice Chairman of US National Player Development Program. Ashe advocated for the four coaches on this program to be diverse, include women and minorities. Ashe wanted Sims to be one of the 4 national coaches.

[00:56:42.12]

The culture of tennis clubs and the lack of diversity in these clubs. At Longwood Sims was the "face" of the club. The club had only one African American member who was a priest and didn't play tennis. His work at Sportsman Tennis Club led to his position at Longwood.

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Longwood brought him in to upgrade their tennis program. Details a number of qualities that brought him into Longwood, like having been assistant coach at Harvard University, that made him an attractive candidate for the position and made it possible to sell the idea of an African American head pro to the members.

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Discusses how he was received by the members of the club. Sims time at the club was impactful. Shares the experiences of being the first African American in a predominantly White environment.

[01:09:16.19]

Ashe did visit Sims at Longwood. Ashe offered him the position as national coach which he took. In the way that Ashe mentored and developed younger players, such as Yannick Noah, Sims also mentored and developed a young player, Chanda Rubin.

[01:17:42.11]

When he left Longwood in 1988 there was still only one African American member at Longwood. Recalling African American members at the club. Being asked to provide commentary for a match for a telecast.

[01:23:12.12]

Robert Kraft, when he first applied for membership at the club, did not get in. The club was also not open to Jewish people before Sims' time. At times these old line clubs did not accept Irish, African Americans and others.

[01:26:12.18]

Ashe and club culture. Sims mentions that Ashe never felt comfortable in these clubs. Ashe's and Sims' friend Betram Lee, (the first African American to own a major sports franchise, the Denver Nuggets, he was a minority owner) never entered Longwood through the front door when coming to see Ashe play. Ashe being run off the courts at Forest Hills. When Ashe played at Forest Hills in 68, only one other African American had played on the courts, photographer Gordon Parks. Describes the clubs at that time as bastions of the old world. The dynamic of race and class at these clubs.

[01:32:48.26]

From 1988-91 worked with Ashe on the national player development program. Ashe was starting to have medical issues, but remained incredibly productive. Sims became aware of his health issues when he went public. Sims became friends with Walt Hazzard, a good friend of Ashe. Recalls a funny moment with Ashe and Hazzard. It was the last time that Hazzard and Ashe were together and the last time that Sims and Ashe were involved in a clinic together.

[01:43:13.04]

In 1993 Sims was supposed to go to New York to see Ashe, but had to cancel due to his mother's illness. Ashe passed during his visit with his mother. Recalls finding out about Ashe's death. Remarks on Ashe's productivity during his illness. Describes Ashe's impact and legacy.

[01:52:24.00]

That Ashe used his tennis platform to have impact beyond the sport. Describes Ashe as very smart, curious, inquisitive, disciplined and driven.