

Interview with Tom Chewing
SESSION 1 (4/29/2020)
Timed Log

[00:00:00]

Born in Richmond, Virginia in 1945. During that time Richmond was under segregation laws. Chewing was not aware of the impact of segregation until he met Arthur Ashe.

[00:02:11]

Chewing was an avid baseball player as a child and remembers being introduced to tennis after a baseball team didn't show up for a game. Chewing continued playing tennis, mostly at William Byrd Park in Richmond. Chewing played his first tournament at 11 in Richmond called the Novice Tournament.

[00:04:21]

Byrd Park was in the South Central part of town. Chewing describes Byrd Park. Chewing recalls playing at Byrd Park with anyone who wanted to play. Sam Woods worked at the park and introduced him to tennis. Byrd Park was a public Park. Chewing used wooden rackets and they had to wear all white if they were playing in a tournament. Balls were white, unlike now where they can be different colors. Recalls tennis being mostly a country club sport at that time. Rackets were more fragile than they are today. At 14 Chewing won a tournament where Wilson Sporting Goods supplied him with equipment and uniforms. Arthur Ashe was also in this program with Wilson Sporting Goods when Chewing met him.

[00:07:06]

"Whites" were required for tournaments, but anything could be worn for training. Class dynamic in tennis in the US. At the time Chewing found Byrd Park, which had White kids from different neighborhoods in Richmond as diverse. The road parallel to Byrd Park was originally called Lee Boulevard, but now is Arthur Ashe Jr. BLVD, although Ashe didn't play at the park until he was on the Davis Cup team. Byrd Park was an equal distance from the African American neighborhood as Chewing's neighborhood.

[00:10:18]

Chewing met Ashe in 1960 at a Mid Atlantic tournament in West Virginia at Oglebay Park. West Virginia was integrated at the time. Chewing looked at the draw sheets for the tournament and saw a name he didn't recognize. Chewing questioned the name and was introduced to Ashe. Ashe knew of Chewing through articles in the Richmond Times-Dispatch.

[00:14:04]

After meeting for the first time, Chewing and Ashe went to lunch. Ashe told him about Brook Field, where he played. The park served the African American community and Ashe's father worked as the caretaker of the park. He also mentioned to Chewing that he was coached by Dr. Walter Johnson. Ashe was reading the Invisible Man by Ralph Ellison when they met. He mentioned that although he couldn't play in Richmond tournaments due to segregation laws, he was playing in national tournaments. Tournaments outside of Richmond had more sympathy for Ashe's situation.

[00:16:32]

Because Ashe couldn't play locally but did nationally and internationally, it limited how much his family could see him play. Chewning's mother, who was an English teacher, would pack his suitcase with books when he would travel for tennis. Ashe would read some of Chewning's books. Ashe was told that while out on the tennis circuit that he represented his race and although this made him somewhat serious and reserved, he also had a humorous, fun side to his personality. That summer Chewning and Ashe would share a dorm at some of the tournaments.

[00:18:49]

Their friend developed and they decided to meet up back in Richmond. Chewning came to Ashe's side of town as it was easier during segregation. Ashe Sr. would pick Chewning up in his truck and he and Ashe would play at Brookfield Park. They remained friends into their adulthood.

[00:20:52]

Ashe and Chewning first met in 1960. After their lunch, Chewning did get a chance to watch Ashe play tennis. Describes Ashe's technique as poetic and graceful, noted that Ashe was very calm when he played and that he never got mad on the court.

[00:22:53]

Chewning and Ashe never played each other in Richmond. Chewning asked if Ashe could play during one tournament but the request was declined. To protest, Chewning told Ashe that he too wouldn't play in the tournament, but Ashe insisted that he should.

[00:25:22]

The response from locals when Chewning and Ashe played at Brook Field. They were breaking the law playing at the park. Chewning noticed that there was a pool at the park, but Ashe shared with him that the pool had been drained to contest a court ruling to integrate the pool.

[00:28:05]

Through his friendship with Ashe, Chewning starts to understand the impact of segregation. Chewning was aware that there were Jim Crow laws but didn't know what the consequences were if they got caught. His parents did not support the laws. His father, who was a doctor, had African American patients. They thought that segregation was wrong.

[00:30:50]

Few people knew of Chewning and Ashe playing in Brookfield until after it was legally integrated. By the time Ashe had won the US Open in 1968 he was welcomed everywhere in Richmond. Chewning doesn't recall any backlash from their breaking the segregation laws. Remembers Ashe Sr. as tough on the outside but soft on the inside.

[00:32:55]

There wasn't much difference between the courts at Brookfield and Byrd Park. There were fewer people using the courts at Brookfield. Chewning would have refreshments at the Ashe's home after playing. The Ashe home was small and very tidy. Johnnie Ashe was fun to be around.

[00:35:36]

Chewning and Ashe, when in integrated states, would do more social activities like go to the movies, go bowling, etc. Sometimes they would experience prejudice. In St. Louis they wouldn't let Ashe enter a movie theater. Chewning remembers that other players and tennis officials would sometimes be unfriendly to Ashe, but doesn't remember any spectators heckling. Once in Arizona in 1961, during a tournament, all of Ashe's racquets were stolen by a player from California. Ashe did not see it so much as an act of prejudice and more of an act of jealousy. Ashe did not let adversity stop him.

[00:40:08]

Other players would say mean comments when he would walk by. Referees would also call bad balls on Ashe sometimes. Chewning witnessed players calling unfair balls on Ashe and officials, who made the final decision, almost always sided with the other player against Ashe. Ashe always dealt with these moments with calm. On these early tournaments, Ashe was often the only African American playing.

[00:44:28]

Chewning continued to play tennis as he transitioned to college. Ashe suggested University of California, Los Angeles to Chewning. Chewning went to college in North Carolina. Ashe told Chewning the one thing that he didn't like about UCLA was that he was playing too much tennis. He thought he would be able to give more time to academics.

[00:47:24]

Unlike in some places like VA, where tennis was mainly played in the summer, the weather in California meant one could play year-round, and could develop faster. Chewning and Ashe maintained their friendship after they both went off to college. Chewning, after college in North Carolina, went to graduate school in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Chewning got married the same week as Ashe wins the US Open. Ashe called Chewning and took him and his new wife, Nancy, out to dinner. By the time Ashe was on the Davis Cup team, Chewning had his daughter and noted while Ashe engaged affectionately with his daughter, that Ashe too, may have wanted to have a family.

[00:51:50]

Chewning and his family eventually moved back to Richmond and would get together with Ashe when he was in town. Sometimes they would also go to visit Ashe and watch him play. Conversation topics shifted from tennis to life experiences.

[00:52:48]

Ashe talked about his growing activism with Chewning. Recalls a man threatening Ashe to come to a civil rights rally in DC and Ashe refusing to go. He didn't want to be a mouth piece but later felt that he could do more for civil rights. He wanted to do things his way. Chewning recalls talking to Ashe about his trip to South Africa. Ashe was aware that he needed to speak up for civil rights but had his own approach.

[00:57:06]

Ashe would always listen to others political positions. Ashe spoke to Chewning about his support for women's right. Chewning would be involved in Ashe's clinics when he was in Richmond. Ashe advocated for kids playing tennis.

[01:01:34]

Chewning remembers a clinic he did at Byrd Park, in 1972/3 and his generosity to a place that had once restricted him. Chewning met Jeanne Ashe when she and Ashe were dating. Ashe introduced her as "the girl I'm going to marry."

[01:04:51]

Chewning was shocked in 1979 when Ashe had a heart attack while teaching kids at a clinic. Chewning saw the announcement on the news and then contacted Ashe Sr. He was emotional and tearful about his son. Ashe shared with Chewning that he had had a blood transfusion and through that contracted AIDS. Chewning asked Ashe why he didn't sue the hospital where he got the tainted blood and Ashe told him that hospital officials told him that there was a chance and he had signed a waiver.

[01:09:42]

Chewning found out about Ashe's AIDS diagnosis during his public press conference. Chewning has worked to keep Ashe's legacy alive. Chewning was asked to be a participant in an effort to erect a statue of Ashe in Richmond. It took three years to get the statue erected on Monument Ave., which had statues honoring confederate figures. The effort drew controversy. Chewning saw adding the statue and integrating Monument Ave as the right thing to do, and as a way to fulfill an earlier desire to protest Ashe's exclusion from a tournament in Richmond. Chewning describes the statue.

[01:15:07]

A verse from the Bible, Hebrews chapter 12 verse 1, Ashe's favorite scripture is on the statue. Chewning recalls other efforts to preserve Ashe's legacy. The controversy surrounding erecting Ashe's statue on Monument Ave. Some were against placing the statue in a place devoted to the confederacy, others were against the artistry. There were 20 public meetings for the statue. Senator Tim Kaine was involved with the city council at that time. He was a supporter of the project. There were people who tried to buy them off.

[01:21:09]

The international and national press keep the project going. Eventually Richmond embraced the statue.

[01:23:32]

Chewning comments on Ashe's legacy.