

Interview for Marcel Freeman  
SESSION 1 (10/16/2020)  
Timed Log

[00:00:00]

On March 30, 1960, Marcel Freeman was born in New Bedford, Massachusetts, to a Black father and a white mother. His mother completed her bachelor's at the Rhode Island School of Design; his father completed his master's in health education at Boston University. Using the G.I. Bill\*, they moved to Wyandanch, in Suffolk County, New York [one of the few places] where a Black man could own property (in New York). \*\* The area was predominantly Black and poor, and the family lived there for the first five years of Freeman's life.

\* Formally, the Servicemen's Readjustment Act.

\*\* According to a 2019 Newsday article by Olivia Winslow, "Dividing Lines, Visible and Invisible: Segregation of Blacks, Whites Built into the History of Long Island," during The Great Migration, "there was an influx of black people to [Long] Island in the 1950s, '60s, and '70s well before the enactment of fair-housing laws in an era 'when segregation was considered to be very legitimate.'"

[00:02:08]

Father's ambitions likely connect with his upbringing in San Antonio, Texas, and his relationship with his own father, a Baptist minister. Father has a unique range of interests, including music, art, reading, and writing, which he hands down to his son. Freeman names his son Miles after his father's favorite musician, Miles Davis. Tennis becomes the greatest gift his father hands down.

[00:04:06]

[In 1965,] the family moves from Wyandanch to Mineola, closer to mainstream New York with more opportunity. They live in a predominantly working-class Italian neighborhood, and he regularly faces racism from ages five to eleven. Freeman becomes good at tennis at 11 and earns a scholarship to Port Washington Tennis Academy (in Long Island). Trains there for two years [1971-73]. John McEnroe and other notable players also train there due to a famous Australian coach, [Henry Christian "Harry" Hopman.]

[00:06:05]

Father falls in love with tennis after an injury forces him to retire from playing professional football with the New York Titans (predecessor to the New York Jets). He begins teaching tennis and coaches Freeman until he hands him off to professionals in Long Island. [See video recording to see Freeman's images of his father, Edward Freeman.]

[00:08:01]

Emotionally connecting with his father is difficult due to his difficulty connecting with his own father. Relationship with his father becomes the most important in his life. [Freeman displays father's mementos.]

[00:10:04]

Tennis becomes the greatest gift from his father. Father introduces him to tennis at age five [1965] while teaching at Bethpage State Park (New York). Though patient, his father is determined to make him fall in love with the game. Freeman initially dislikes tennis, but it's where his father is happiest. Thus, tennis becomes their way to connect and eventually becomes his sanctuary.

[00:12:05]

Tennis allows Freeman to fulfill many dreams, including playing center court at Wimbledon against Ivan Lendl while Arthur Ashe is commentating [1986]. Ashe taps in and out of his life at different times but has a tremendous impact as a role model, particularly regarding race identity.

[00:13:16]

Tennis and race. Contrary to his father's optimism, Freeman is disappointed by the lack of Black people in tennis. People gravitate towards his father at country clubs, like the Jewish Roslyn Country Club. A desire for acceptance motivates Freeman to improve in tennis. His light complexion helps him become more accepted despite some harassment. His father is the only Black man everywhere they go, and he always aspires to see his son on center court. Freeman's acceptance into the Port Washington Tennis Academy prompts the family to move to Mineola.

[00:17:12]

Though more accepted by Black folk, his family is largely unaccepted by society. [Despite race,] his father is loved by people in the tennis community. Yet, it's still illegal for his parents to marry [in most] U.S. states when they wed in New York (1958).\* [See video recording for an image of Freeman at UCLA in 1980 and an image of family.]

\* Though New York state never passed anti-miscegenation laws, *Loving v. Virginia* (1967) made interracial marriage legal throughout the U.S.

[00:19:27]

Audio disruption.

[00:19:45]

Tennis becomes his fit when he doesn't fit anywhere else because politics and race are removed.

[00:21:08]

Tennis also functions as a barrier. [He and his father are] aware they can't go some places, and he believes his father's [race] influenced his dismissal from the Port Washington Tennis Academy [1973]. Rick Elstein, a Jewish man, begins mentoring him at the Roslyn Racquet Club from ages 13 -18, as his father becomes less involved in his life. He reconnects with his father at age 30, after retiring from pro tennis, embracing therapy, and returning to UCLA in 1990 to complete his sociology degree (attended 1978-82).

[00:24:55]

A sense of feeling different on the tennis court provides his edge on the court. Tennis becomes a vehicle for self-expression, and he plays with a chip on his shoulder, motivated by race to show people what he can do. Though his father doesn't always perceive color [in tennis], he loves Ashe.

[00:26:53]

Father takes him at age eight to the West Side Tennis Club at Forest Hills in Queens, Long Island, to see Ashe win the first U.S. Open in 1968. Right before Ashe wins the Open, Freeman wins his first tennis racquet, a Wilson Valiant, in Brookline, Massachusetts. The racquet remains a reminder of his father's aspirations for him and his own ambitions for his son to find something he loves.

[00:28:16]

Father hosts a tournament named for the Pakistani tennis player Haroon Rahim, and Freeman wins. The only other person who loves the game as much as his father is his uncle, Marcus Freeman.\*

\* Marcus Freeman is the founder of Black Tennis Magazine. He founded the magazine in 1977 after recognizing how the accomplishments of Black tennis players were excluded from newspapers. A group

of young tennis players, including Zina Garrison, had won singles and doubles in a major Texas tournament. Yet, when the winners were reported in a local newspaper, Garrison was omitted.

[00:28:57]

Freeman reflects on the struggles of his father and ancestors. He learns to appreciate the things his father gave him, but wonders about his potential had his father been more involved. Recognizes father's accomplishments, having three master's degrees in the 1960s as a Black man, but wonders about his own potential. Tennis and the people and places he encountered through the sport became his father's legacy in his life.

[00:32:53]

Freeman is eighteen and the star of [Paul D.] Schreiber High School tennis team when he meets Ashe [1978]. Freeman applies to the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA). However, George Lansing "Butch" Seewagen recruits him to Columbia University and arranges for him to hit with his friend, Ashe. Ashe convinces Freeman to choose UCLA. Ashe writes a letter to Freeman after an event for the United Negro College Fund hosted at Madison Square Garden [likely in 1977 at the UNCF-Arthur Ashe 3rd Annual Tennis Benefit]. They also participate in an exhibition in Port Chester, Connecticut, along with John Hayes and Colin Dibley. Along with gifts from Freeman's mother and coach, Rick Elstein, Ashe gives him \$500 for his move to UCLA.

[00:36:27]

Freeman receives half a [tennis] scholarship and half financial aid during his first year at UCLA after a player quits to go pro. Freeman becomes one of only three UCLA tennis players to be a four-year all-American. UCLA wins two national championships while he's on the team. He wins the IMF Head-Arthur Ashe College Player of the Year award during his senior year [1982].\*

\* Freeman received the Intercollegiate Tennis Association (ITA) National Player of the year in 1982, according to the UCLA Bruins website; these may refer to the same award.

[00:38:22]

Emphasizes the importance of having a spiritual foundation. Freeman wins several other awards, including the Black Tennis Hall of Fame and the Eastern Tennis Hall of Fame (2016). As a coach, he has the greatest impact with Chanda Rubin, a Black female tennis player who improved from 55th to 6th internationally [in 1996]. Found fulfillment in instilling a stronger sense of self within her.

[00:41:08]

Recounts his father's final years and the history of the American Tennis Association (ATA). ATA's founding is motivated by Black people being banned from the United States Lawn Tennis Association (USLTA). \*

\* Founded in 1916, the American Tennis Association (ATA) is the oldest African-American sports organization in the U.S.

[00:43:42]

Freeman plays in the ATA 12 and under in Boston [1972], and due to Bud Collins, the ATA [championship] is picked up by Public Broadcasting Service (PBS). \* White people are allowed to play in the ATA, but usually, only poor whites play. Freeman reads the ATA program from 1973, summarizing the organization's history and John "Donald" Budge's match against Jimmy McDaniel. \*\* Freeman beats Rodney Harmon to win the 14 and under ATA championships in 1973 and later returns to give ATA clinics. Ashe is unique from many tennis players in that he gave a lot of himself to others.

\* According to “The Doug Smith Post,” in 1972, Bud Collins and Althea Gibson were PBS sports commentators during the ATA men’s championship between Horace Reid and Arthur Carrington.

\*\* According to the “Black Tennis Hall of Fame,” on July 29, 1940, Don Budge, a white player and the first man to win all four of tennis’ major tournaments in the same year, played Jimmy McDaniel, the Black tennis champion in 1940 at Harlem’s Cosmopolitan Club, voluntarily crossing the color line.

[00:49:08]

Meets Ashe [in 1977] via Seewagen three years after winning the ATA 14 and under championship. Freeman and Ashe play a doubles exhibition and give a clinic. As a man of few words, Ashe is most memorable for what he stood for rather than the life lessons he gave. Black professional tennis players often seek help from Ashe, feeling unprepared for the pro circuit. Ashe differed from other young Black players (during Freeman’s pro years). They didn’t feel Ashe provided the guidance they sought.

[00:53:12]

Cites [*Off the Court*, 1981] by Neil Amdur about the role Ashe’s childhood may have played in his reserved nature and his Davis Cup conflicts with John McEnroe and Peter Fleming.

[00:54:40]

Though difficult to reach emotionally, Ashe was always present and willing to support financially, even without knowing Freeman well. Freeman hangs out with Ashe, Jeanne [Moutoussamy-Ashe], and Quincy Jones for a week in 1982, while Ashe is Davis Cup Captain and Freeman is college player of the year. Black tennis players sought a savior in Ashe, which he couldn’t provide. Father helps him understand Ashe better later in life. Estimates [since his retirement] only ten Black male tennis players have performed better than himself.

[00:57:49]

Freeman initially forgets then later remembers writing to Ashe and Ashe sending \$500 to begin his collegiate career.

[00:59:24]

Ashe felt strongly about morality and self-responsibility. References Ashe’s commentary on moral decay in America and the Black community from [the chapter “The Burden of Race” in Ashe’s *Days of Grace*, 1993]. At one point, Freeman feels Ashe is snobby, but his opinion evolves.

[01:00:56]

Black tennis pros feel let down when they reach out to Ashe, and he is not there. Freeman recalls Chip Hooper’s ascension and stumble. Ashe’s financial success comes earlier [in his career] than Black successors like Zina Garrison and Serena Williams. They lack endorsements even when outperforming higher-paid white competitors like [Maria] Sharapova. Ashe seemed to crack a code that Freeman and other Black players did not. However, he also contrasts Ashe’s work ethic and confidence with their own.

[01:05:22]

Ashe commentates Freeman’s center court match at Wimbledon [1986], but he is too self-conscious to play his best. Likens the empowerment Black people feel during Ashe’s 1975 Wimbledon victory to Joe Louis’ [boxing victory] over Max Schmeling [in 1938]. Freeman donates an Ashe-autographed Head Comp racquet to a Black tennis program in L.A. but spends less time giving clinics than Ashe. Though not strong with interpersonal with [Black pro] players, Ashe often gave his time to [youth] clinics.

[01:08:55]

Freeman displays Davis Cup pin and reads an article documenting him and Vicki Nelson becoming the IMF Head Tennis Magazine College Player of the Year. Reflects on the significance of [Glenn] Bassett describing him as “the best athlete he’s ever coached,” despite also coaching Connors and Ashe. People believed in his potential, but he struggled to believe in himself.

[01:10:34]

Reflects on life lessons from tennis. Encourages listeners to have faith, maintain gratitude, and develop discipline early to become great at something. Cites chapters from *Days of Grace*: “The Burden of Race” and “Camera.” Tennis and support from his father and Ashe have given him a better sense of himself.

[01:14:10]

Compares Ashe and Malcolm X and concludes Ashe cared more about injustice than race.

[01:15:51]

Senior year at UCLA (1982), Freeman receives the IMF Head College Player of the Year award from Ashe at the U.S. Open. Winning the award automatically places Freeman on the Davis Cup team. Ashe leads the Davis Cup team to victory as captain in 1981 and 1982. Besides his disagreements with several players, Ashe believed his growing activism in the Haitian refugee crisis influenced the end of his tenure as captain [in 1985]. [See *Days of Grace* chapter “Protest and Politics.”]

[01:18:45]

Freeman spends ten days with Ashe and the Davis Cup team in St. Louis [Missouri]. Quincy Jones performs at Busch [Memorial] Stadium for the “Budweiser Superfest” on July 10, 1982. Jones and the team stay at the same hotel, and he invites them on his tour bus to see his concert. Since it is Ashe’s birthday, Jones, the team, and 80,000 stadium goers sing “Happy Birthday!” Freeman warms up McEnroe for his historic win over Sweden’s Mats [Arne Olof] Wilander. \*

\* On July 11, 1982, McEnroe beat Wilander in a record-setting Davis Cup match that lasted six hours and thirty-two minutes, according to ESPN Front Row. According to Essentially Sports, this was the longest match in Davis Cup history, until the tiebreaker era.

[01:21:05]

Considers the spiritual thread that connects life moments. Family dysfunction and isolation from his parents' families leads him to tennis. Continued involvement in tennis allows him to be a mentor to young people.

[01:23:30]

Expresses encouragement and sympathy for young people who feel unsure of their future.

[01:26:00]

Joins the pro circuit at age twenty-one [1982]. Sustains himself traveling and peaks in the top 50 for six months. Also experiences [financial] struggles, injuries, and burnout. Learns to play his best tennis when he can stay [present] in the moment.

[01:28:54]

Plays on the pro circuit from 1982 to 1989. Returns to UCLA in 1990 to complete his bachelor’s. Playing professionally affords him the ability to travel around the world, but it comes at a cost.

[01:30:23]

Begins coaching after realizing he does not want to pursue social work. Accepts an offer to coach Lindsay Davenport and declines admission into [Kent] School of Social Work at the University of Louisville [in Kentucky]. After nine months, Davenport connects him with Chanda Rubin from Lafayette, Louisiana.

[01:32:07]

Last interaction with Ashe: Ashe sends a letter saying he is thinking about him (the mid-1980s), and mentions last seeing him playing against Chip Hooper at Madison Square Garden [potentially the 1982 U.S. Open].

[01:34:02]

Freeman encourages listeners to learn from his life lessons so they may live without regret.

[01:35:19]

Coaching Rubin allows him to be the encouragement he always wanted.

[01:36:16]

Freeman's son, Miles, briefly enters the room.

[01:37:12]

Ashe's legacy of coaching. Ashe understood that life is about giving. Though Freeman and his contemporaries on the pro circuit were critical that Ashe didn't do this in an interpersonal way [with them], he did it broadly. Coaching tennis serves as a vehicle for Freeman to teach young people, especially those of color, about life because he remembers how difficult it was to make it.

[01:41:24]

Thanks.