

Interview with Lenward Simpson
Session 1 (8/21/2020)
Timed Log

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Lenny Simpson was born in Wilmington, North Carolina in 1948. He and his family lived next door to Dr. Hubert and Celeste Eaton. During his childhood, Wilmington was very segregated and enacted Jim Crow laws. Tennis was a "foreign object" to African Americans in his town during that time. There were many obstacles to playing tennis, particularly the Jim Crow laws. He got involved in tennis at age 5 in 1953. At that time tennis was perceived in the community as a "White person's game." His neighbor, Nathaniel Jackson, was the first African American mail carrier in Wilmington. He was good friends with Simpson's family. He would see Jackson walking by dressed in all white and carrying a "wooden thing" in his hand. Simpson was curious. He would see Jackson with a Coca Cola and was intrigued. He eventually got up the nerve to ask Jackson where he got the soda and Jackson said he would take him if his parents said it was ok. That's how Simpson started playing.

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Simpson got permission from his parents. He would sneak onto the property of Dr. Hubert and Celeste Eaton, which adjoined his family's property. Their property had a tennis court. Simpson would hide behind a shrub and watch a number of professional African Americans and some Whites who would come and play on the Eaton courts. It was a gathering place. After his parents gave him permission, Mr. Jackson took him over the Eaton courts. Simpson remembers entering the grounds of the home and seeing the pool, cars, like a country club. He was five years old at this time. He entered the tennis courts where other African Americans were playing. Mr. Jackson introduced Simpson to the adults who were there. The last person who he is introduced to is Althea Gibson. This was 1953. She says to him "Lenward, what took you so long?" She calls him champ and that has stayed with Simpson throughout his life. She gave him his first tennis racquet.

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Simpson talks about the Eatons. Dr. Eaton moved to the area and purchased six acres. He sold Simpson's parents their property to build their home. Eaton owned much of the property in the area. Simpson highlights Celeste Eaton, whose father was Dr. Burnett, who had a practice in Wilmington in the 30s. When Celeste married Hubert, her father turned over his successful medical practice to his son-in-law. The Eatons purchased

their property in 1946 and added on to the home in 1948. The Eatons were known in the community for being “The Leaders” in the community. There was a great deal of respect for their Civil Rights work. They had respect across the racial lines.

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Dr. Eaton was “the first” in many aspects, on the Board on University of North Carolina Wilmington, The YMCA and others. Simpson describes Celeste as one of the kindest and sweetest people and Hubert as more formal. Originally when Hubert and Dr. Robert Walter Johnson came up with the idea of cultivating Althea Gibson, bringing her from Harlem to train in tennis, Celeste did not want to do it because of Gibson’s rough background. In the end Celeste agreed and ended up teaching Gibson about social graces and Southern behavior, which was a benefit to Gibson in her tennis pursuits.

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Dr Hubert Eaton and Dr. Robert Johnson had been training junior tennis players since the 30s, the American Tennis Association (ATA) Junior Development Team. Their vision was to find the best Black athletes in tennis, train them on their home courts and take them to the various matches and tournaments to compete all over the country. The athletes would train at Dr. Johnson’s “camp” at 1422 Pierce Street in Lynchburg Virginia. Without Eaton and Johnson many young African Americans would have not had the opportunity otherwise.

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For many African Americans junior tennis players, developing their skills in the sport would more than likely lead to college scholarships not necessarily a professional career in the sport. The odds were not very good in becoming a professional athlete, very few made it to the professional arena. There weren’t hardly any chances for Black players to become professional without succeeding in the ATA. Black players couldn’t play in the US Lawn Tennis Association (USLTA now USTA) tournaments. Eventually the color barrier would be broken in the USLTA in the 50s.

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Only certain people in the community were invited to play at the Eatons. It was known as the Black Country Club in the community. The Eatons’ court was the only place where Black people could play tennis in the town. Simpson would do tasks at the Eatons. Simpson was the youngest kid at the Eatons. For two years Simpson would hit off of the back board, he didn’t hit over a net until his was 7 1/2 years old, He practiced sun up to sun down.

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Althea Gibson and Mr. Jackson would practice with him. Simpson recalls Gibson and Jackson pranking him. Simpson came from a middle class family. His father was principal of the high school and his mother was a school teacher. His parents were not involved in tennis. His parents didn't want him over at the Eatons, but they were friends with the Eatons. They thought that Simpson would be in the way. Simpson went to his first tournament at age 8. Gibson and Jackson recommended that he start going to tournaments. His parents said no at first, they did not want their son to go to a tournament out of town. The tournament was in the South Eastern Boys Championship in Durham, North Carolina. His mother agreed on the condition that she chaperone the group of boys attending the tournament. His mother saw him play for the first time. He won his match. His mother cried and apologized to him for not understanding. Dr. Johnson saw him play as well and invited him to his summer camp. Simpson would be the youngest player on the team in Lynchburg.

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He went to Dr. Johnson's camp in 1958. Although his mother saw the potential, she was always uncomfortable with sending him away for the camp. When he played his first US Open match in 1964, his parents could not attend the match due to segregation at West Side Tennis Club. *[Simpson is sitting outside during the recording and it starts raining. I check in on him]*. Simpson recalls his first trip to the camp. He missed his family, he was homesick. Eventually Dr. Johnson called his parents who came and spent a few days with him to encourage him. Simpson got better and Dr. Johnson rallied the other kids to support him. Dr. Johnson assigned a "buddy buddy" system and Simpson was assigned to Arthur Ashe. Simpson was 9 and Ashe was 15 years old.

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Simpson's first impression of Ashe. Simpson had heard about Ashe and his accomplishments at that time. Simpson was in awe of Ashe. There was a pecking order on the court at the camp. Simpson remembers his doubled partner, Luis Glass, who was 10 years old, He remembers challenging Betsy Stockard who was overseeing the scheduling of the court. Simpson called her a "Black ugly thing." Calling someone Black in the 50s was considered a harsh insult. That evening Dr. J called Simpson to talk to him and asked him about his day. Simpson told him that everything was great. Dr. J told Simpson to never lie to him, he knew what Simpson had said. Dr. J called Ashe and told him to help Simpson pack his bags. He sent Simpson home. Ashe told Simpson that he would try to talk to Dr. J. Dr. J took Simpson to the bus station and sent him home. His parents met him on the other end and spanked him. Simpson was embarrassed to be seen by the Eatons. Dr. J taught him a lesson.

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Simpson does not call names to this day. When he went back to the camp, no one brought up the incident. Simpson recalls the supportive environment and the supportive people around him during those times. Simpson and Ashe would become lifelong friends. He was a role model for Simpson.

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Simpson describes Ashe as a man of few words, but when he spoke everyone listened. He describes him as generous and kind. Ashe would take extra time to hit with him. Simpson recalls that there were other and better Black tennis players at the time, but that they did not make the right decisions as Ashe did, nor had the discipline or structure that Ashe had. The objective at that time was not to become a successful tennis player but a successful person in life. In the early 60s, while practicing, Ashe would give Simpson a quarter every time he passed him at the net as a motivator.

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In his conversations with Ashe, Simpson recalls that they talked about everything. Simpson remembers a girl, Joyce Douglass, in Washington DC that Ashe liked. Ashe was shy. Simpson would joke with Ashe about Joyce. Simpson remembers, when he was about 15, at a match with Ashe, where he asked him to approach the girl. It worked and Ashe would end up having a summer romance with Joyce. Simpson and Ashe talked about many things: race, friendship, the game etc.

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Simpson states that Ashe's aspirations in tennis at that time was to be a world champion. He was not playing just for a college scholarship. When he was around 17, 18 years old, when he was being nominated as the first African American to make the Davis junior Cup team, he and Simpson had conversations about it. Ashe plotted his ascension step by step. He was ambitious. Other than tennis, education was very important to Ashe. Ashe's achievements inspire the One Love Tennis community.

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In 1962 in Kalamazoo Michigan, Ashe's last year in the 18 and under juniors. Only the best players in the country played in this tournament. Simpson, who was 13 at the time, also played in this tournament in the 13 and Unders. This tournament would determine if Ashe would be invited to the Junior Davis Cup team. After winning a 3 hour and 45 minute match, the tournament director made Ashe play his next match an hour later, which was not the usual protocol. Other players would be scheduled the following day, so they had time to rest. Simpson expressed his anger to Ashe who remained calm about the sleight. When they got back to the dorm, for Ashe to quickly freshen up, Ashe scolded Simpson for his outward expression of anger. Simpson remembered the incident at Dr. Johnson and changed his tune. Ashe didn't win the match, but he did go

on to be on the junior Davis Cup team, becoming the first African American to do so. Simpson learn an important lesson that day.

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Simpson discusses how Dr. Johnson prepared his players to deal with the racism they would experience when they integrated matches. Many of his players where breaking the color line and Dr. Johnson knew that it had to be done in a generative way. He taught them through discipline and structure and how to utilize the system to their advantage. Ashe was introverted and responded to the training different than others, he internalized his feelings, whereas the players were more outwardly expressive about their feelings. They would always play close balls as if they were out. Dr. Johnson insisted on this. Dr. Johnson taught them that even as the goal line unfairly kept moving that they still had a chance to win. Ashe was gifted in compartmentalizing his feelings and his goals.

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Simpson recalls traveling with Dr. Johnson and other players. Every year Dr. Johnson would buy a brand new Buick Master and the players would pack it with suitcases. Simpson asked why they always left very early in the morning. Ashe explained to Simpson that Dr. Johnson promised their parents to always put their safety first. They would start travel at that time to ensure they arrived at their location during daylight. It was unsafe for African Americans to travel at night. Simpson mentions that they had the Green Book before there was a Green Book. They stayed with Black families or Black owned hotels. They had to know where they could and could not go.

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There was a great deal of pressure on the players in breaking the color line, but Simpson describes it as part of the process. They couldn't show lots of emotion. They had to be always polite after a game whether they won or lost. But was also enjoyable and was an opportunity of a lifetime. According to Simpson playing the match was no pressure, but traveling in the Jim Crow South was. Simpson witnessed both blatant and subtle racism. Simpson recalls Johnnie Ashe (Ashe's brother and who he is still close to) saying that Dr. Johnson, Dr. Eaton, Althea Gibson, Ashe, are the four Black pillars of tennis. Simpson feels that his involvement with this tennis world was prophetic.

Interview with Lenward Simpson
Session 2 (8/25/2020)
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Simpson mentions the four Black pillars of tennis: Dr. Johnson, Dr. Eaton, Gibson, Ashe. Simpson calls Dr. Johnson The Godfather of Black tennis. Simpson makes a connection between the ATA's junior tennis development program (1930s) and the National Junior Tennis Leagues's (NJTL, 1969) program which was started by Ashe, Charlie Pasasrell and Sheridan Snyder. Ashe knew a program like NJTL could work because he participated in one with Dr. Johnson and Dr. Eaton. Both doctors invested their own money in that program. It was a great opportunity for the young players, but it also involved sacrifice as they forged new paths for generations to come. The rules that Dr. Johnson established made it possible to make inroads and kept the doors to integrated tennis open to others down the line. One rule was how balls were called.

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Although being on Dr. Johnson's junior team was an honor, there were also pressures. Simpson recalls feeling like they were in a fishbowl, with all eyes on them. They were scrutinized continually. There were incidents in almost all of the USLTA tournaments that they played such as line call discrepancies, comments being shouted at them as they played. Simpson and Luis Glass, 11 or 12 years of age. were playing in East Orange New Jersey, at the East Orange Country Club. They were playing in the 13 and Unders. A little kid came up to them in the stands and said "why are you Niggers here, playing in this tournament?" Simpson and Glass, were shocked and didn't have an answer. The kids mom heard and called the kid over, but didn't say anything to Glass and Simpson.

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Simpson recalls incidents in his hometown. One of Dr. Johnson's guidelines is that every person on the team would play their home tournament during the circuit. Simpson played at his city's championship at age 15. Very few Black players played in that tournament. When Simpson played, the tournament officials brought in adult male players from out of town to play almost ensuring that Simpson would not win, but he won. Simpson would hear name calling while playing, someone even spat on his hand when he went to pick up a ball. Simpson mentions that these incidents would give him the motivation to win. He won the city championship five year in a row.

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Simpson, Glass and Ashe played at the Western Boys Championship in Springfield Ohio. You had to qualify to get into the tournament, which they did. They traveled from Lynchburg Virginia and found out that Ashe had been defaulted in the tournament, but Glass and Simpson were not. Ashe was up and coming and was the strongest competitor of the group. This upset Dr. Johnson and he wrote the USLTA about what the tennis director had done. From that day onward there were no issues with playing in this tournament.

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Simpson doesn't remember the reason they gave but was sure it was something trivial. Simpson believes it revolved around them arriving late to the tournament, but they all traveled together and arrived at the same time and Glass and Simpson were not defaulted. Ashe didn't say much about this incident.

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Simpson describes the experiences of dealing with racism during tournaments as having opponents from all sides and that it made them tougher and helped the current generation of Black tennis players. Simpson continued in Dr. Johnson's camp for 10 years and Ashe mentored him throughout those 10 years. They were also good friends and that friendship lasted throughout their life. They made a promise to each other that they wouldn't let 7 days go by without making contact by phone and through the years they never missed making contact. Simpson describes his friendship with Ashe as the most special friendship that he has ever had. Ashe told him when he was 13 that if he can look back on his life and claim five true friends then he would have had a blessed life. Ashe was one of his five true friends.

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In 1964 Simpson played his first US Open at Forest Hills at the West End Country Club (West Side Tennis Club). Simpson got a call one day in the late 90s, from a journalist from Racquet Magazine, who informed Simpson that he was the youngest male player to play at the US Open, but it was not in the records and recorded as such. Simpson called the USTA archives and they corrected the error. Michael Chang eventually broke that record being a few months younger. The most important thing at the time is that they (African Americans) finally got a chance to play at the US Open and that they were able to represent the race well.

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At the US Open Simpson played on grass for the first time. They were allowed to play at the club the day of the tournament, but they were not allowed to access the club and

use the facilities like White players. It was the norm for players to practice and use the facilities before a match. Luis Glass' mother, Virginia Glass, knew someone who had access to grass courts nearby and she arraigned for Glass and Simpson to practice on those courts at the Nassau Country Club. Simpson remembers driving up the country club for the match and seeing the Tudor style building. Simpson visited the club a few years ago while screening the Althea Gibson documentary by Rex Miller. He watched the film on the very grass courts that he played on. Ashe was also at the West Side Country Club in 1964. That year Ashe, Simpson and Glass were playing. The following year Ashe, Simpson, Glass and Bonnie Logan were playing.

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Simpson followed Ashe around at the club. One day Ashe asked Simpson if he wanted to get lunch at the club house, which surprised Simpson. They got lunch and are treated well. Simpson orders a hamburger, French fries and a coke, which was \$8.65, which shocked Simpson. The following year, Simpson met Dick Savage, a Davis Cup player and coach. He took Simpson down on the court to practice with him. Ken Rosewald and Rod Laver walk by and joked with Savage. Simpson was in the company of such great players. At his lunch with Ashe in the club house, Ashe paid for lunch, but Simpson did not see him pull out any cash, perhaps he had an account. At that time Ashe was ranked 7th or 8th in the world.

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The servers were mostly Black. Simpson remembers Virginia Glass attending the match to see Luis Glass play. Simpson parents could not come. Simpson played his first round against Ashe. There were only three Black players, and they were scheduled to play against each other in their first rounds. Simpson remembers Stan Smith and Charlie Pasarell, who were friends of Ashe and also playing the match talking about who they would all be playing in the first round. Ashe introduce him to them. All three were much more seasoned players than Simpson and Smith and Pasarell were matched with players comparable to their ranking, but Ashe included Simpson with such respect. Ashe of course won the match. They were scheduled to play in the big stadium court, which the size of the court made Simpson was very nervous. But the tournament was running behind and the ended up playing on the Grand Slam court which held roughly 8,000 people. Simpson remembers looking in the stands and all he saw was white, the balls, the clothing, almost all of the people in the stands were White. Ashe started the match by serving Simpson an easy lob to get him comfortable, which Simpson would normally hit with no problem, but he was nervous and missed the ball. Eventually Ashe leaned over and asked Simpson what was wrong with him. Ashe got to the quarter finals in the match.

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At this point Ashe was in UCLA and on his way to tennis stardom. Simpson, a sophomore in high school at the time, was award scholarships to five private schools.

He attended two boarding schools, The Hill School, Pottstown, PA and Cheshire Academy in Cheshire, CT. They were great opportunities for Simpson both academically and athletically. During this time although Ashe and Simpson stayed in contact, their lives started to evolve in different ways. It was in the 70s that they reconnected. They reconnected at the US Open in 1968 as Simpson was trying to qualify for the matches. He was a freshman in college at East Tennessee State University. He did not qualify, but stayed to watch the Open and witnessed Ashe winning the Open. Simpson continue to play tennis in college and through graduate school. After graduate school he got a job at a country club in Michigan at the Square Lake Country Club in West Bloomfield, MI. After he began to play World Team Tennis in 1974. At this time, his connection with Ashe started to get stronger again. Ashe would invite Simpson and his wife Joanne to spend Christmas with he and his wife Jeanne at the Doral Country Club. He would do clinics and exhibitions with Ashe.

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During the US Open in 1968, Dr. Johnson was at the match as well and Simpson remembers Dr. Johnson giving advice to Ashe. The crowd was not more diverse than when Simpson was there four years earlier. Simpson witnessed the pride and joy in both Dr. Johnson and Ashe's father, Arthur Ashe Sr faces when Ashe won the US Open. It was special moment.

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Ashe stated that playing on the US Davis Cup team as being one of the greatest moments in his life to Simpson. Ashe spoke to Simpson about his South Africa trip and about visiting Nelson Mandela. Prior Ashe asked Simpson about the whether it was the right time for a trip of this sort. Traveling to South African was a major cross road in his life. After reconnecting in 1974 their relation grew closer and closer. Simpson was into cars and every couple of years he would purchase a new car. One year he purchase a 1974 Corvette and when he drove it down to The Doral to meet Ashe for Christmas (1976), Ashe asked him if he could drive it. Ashe did not have a car at the time.

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Ashe and Simpson were also involved professionally. In 1980, Simpson was tennis director at the YMCA in Knoxville Tennessee, running three locations. Ashe made three visits doing clinics and he also did a high school clinic in Knoxville for Simpson. During his first visit, Ashe chided Simpson for picking him up in a limousine to bring him to Vic Tanney Club in Knoxville. At a later visit Simpson would pick him up in his Subaru. Ashe was a man of character, humble.

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Simpson attended a tribute to Ashe in New York and in attendance were 8 other American Tennis Association champions. Ashe had not long come out of the hospital.

There was a large postcard with many, many signatures. Simpson took the card up to Ashe and notice that Ashe didn't look so good, that the color in his face was off. He asked him if he was ok, which he said he was. It was a year later that he passed away. Simpson has a photo from the event.

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Simpson learned about the seriousness of Ashe's health issues right after the press conference from Ashe's brother, Johnnie Ashe. He knew about other health issues before that. Ashe didn't talk to Simpson too much about his activism with TransAfrica.

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Simpson remembers when Ashe became a father, when he and Jeanne adopted their daughter, Camera. Simpson noticed a change in Ashe. He was more expressive.

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When Co-founding the National Junior Tennis League, Ashe called Simpson beforehand to talk through the idea. Ashe mentioned that the idea was inspired by and building on the program that Dr. Johnson created. Ashe wanted to give youth, who had less access to tennis, the opportunity to play, develop and have fun. Ashe would share the blueprint for the program with Ashe.

[01:31:05]

The NJTA is now part of the USTA and One Love is one of the chapters. Ashe became Davis Cup captain, the first African American. He invited Simpson down to the finals in Atlanta in 1974. Simpson and his wife got to meet John McEnroe and Jimmy Connors, Jeanne Ashe was also there. Simpson found Jeanne to be unassuming. Simpson remembers when McEnroe and Connors got into an argument. Ashe called Simpson into the locker room to hear the argument. It was a fiasco. Connors got so mad, he stormed out of the locker room and grab a nearby kid and started hitting with him. Ashe threaten to not have Connors play if he left the locker room. He left and he didn't play the rest of that day. This created a riff between Connors and Ashe. There was often tension between Connors and Ashe.

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Ashe never hinted to Simpson that his activism impacted his tenure as captain. Due to the strong personalities on the team, every match while he was captain was a challenge. Simpson was at the 1975 Wimbledon match. He was trying to qualify but pulled a muscle in his stomach and so was not able to. Simpson had not been back to

Wimbledon until recently. He visited a few years ago as a result of his involvement in the Althea Gibson documentary. He now gets an invite to go every year.

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Simpson learned of Ashe's passing from Johnnie Ashe. It hit Simpson very hard. Simpson recounts what happened immediately after and how the news impacted him. Simpson was one of the 8 speakers to give his eulogy. It was one of the saddest days in Simpson's life. Simpson remembers standing in line at the funeral with Jesse Jackson, Stan Smith, Yannick Noah, Ron Brown, Rod Laver and others. His two daughters were there with him.

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Ashe meant everything to Simpson. He was a brother and father to Simpson. He taught him about life and shared his wisdom. Ashe had a tremendous impact on Simpson. Ashe left him a blueprint of how a man should be. Ashe has left a legacy for all of us. Simpson feels that Ashe was chosen. His legacy belongs to the entire world.