

Interview with Doug Smith
Session 1 (4/28/2020)
Timed Log

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Smith was born in Hampton Virginia in 1942. Many of the Black high schools in the area did not have tennis teams. Smith attended Phenix High School and wanted to play basketball. The coach was also the tennis coach and he convinced Smith to play tennis. Smith was reluctant to play. He didn't think tennis was a masculine sport at that time. Smith ended up playing junior varsity basketball and tennis that year. The star on the team was a player named (William) Billy Neilson. He won the Negro state championship. In 1958 Nelson asked Smith to stay to watch a kid from Richmond, he was good. The next year Smith would play this "kid," Arthur Ashe, he was 15 years old.

**Additional note from Smith -“William ‘Billy’ Neilson won the 1958 Virginia Negro State High School singles title. Arthur defeated me in the 1960 Negro State final. In 1961 Dr. Johnson sent Arthur to St. Louis to live with a friend, so he could compete routinely against top white juniors.”

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Smith describes segregation in Hampton. Smith and Ashe were grateful that the best Black students went into education. Many, due to segregation, had trouble getting jobs. Smith describes that the main challenge of fighting was that the laws were stacked against them.

**Additional note from Smith-“During my generation and several others before, the South - consisted of two societies, one black, one white. Though some of us lived in the same neighborhood, we functioned separately - in two different worlds. By law, blacks and whites attended separate schools, drank from separate public water fountains and sat in separate sections of movie theatres. We were buried in separate cemeteries and black parishioners prayed to the same Christian God that their departed loved ones to provide in heaven what their departed loved ones rarely experienced on earth: peace and justice for all. White companies in the South rarely hire blacks to work in its businesses, colleges, corporations, law firms, etc. With nowhere else to go, the most talented blacks of our parents’ generation became teachers, and they focused on preparing our generation to enter the mainstream. On several occasions, Arthur and I spoke warmly and gratefully of the role our high school teachers played in pushing us to be twice as good as our white counterparts. We discovered that black teachers throughout the South had followed the same lesson plan.”

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Playing tennis during segregation. The Virginia Interscholastic Association had about 14 member schools of which 6 or 7 had tennis teams. This provided an opportunity for high school athletes to compete. Fort Eustis was nearby and had a tennis team. They would compete with their teams. These were the only White teams that they had a chance to compete against in high school. In college, Northern schools traveling south would sometimes stop by and play them.

**Additional Note from Smith-“Phenix High, which was physically located on Hampton University’s campus, played home matches on the university’s courts. Soldiers stationed at Fort Eustis, an Army base near Williamsburg, Va., were the only white opponents we faced. In college, Hampton faced a tough Fort

Eustis team, which then included two nationally ranked players Norm Perry and Billy Higgins, and several northern colleges teams (including Colgate and Rider) that stopped in Hampton on the way to play Florida teams during spring break.”

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For Black teenagers, if you were talented in sports, it could offer you a chance to go to college, except for southern colleges. Southern colleges did not take even star Black athletes in at that time. Tennis was not a big deal in the Black community. There were no "pros" at that time to look up to, so if you pursued tennis professionally, you would still have to have a job. Smith talks about Althea Gibson as an example. To make a living a tennis player would have to represent the US at the major matches, this was not afforded to most Blacks.

**Additional note from Smith-“Talented black athletes and high scholars received athletic/academic scholarships to several of the nation’s top colleges/universities, but southern white colleges, however, didn’t accept black applicants, even if they were superstar athletes or super-smart. Only black teens attending high schools with tennis programs or grew up in a public park with tennis courts yards away from their backyard, as Arthur Ashe did, had early age exposure to the game. Tennis wasn’t popular in black communities. Except for Jack Kramer’s barnstorming pro events, tennis was an amateur sport back then. The Jack Kramer pros couldn’t play in tennis’ major events – Australian Open, French Open, Wimbledon and U.S. Open. Most of the top-ranked players had sponsors. The United States Lawn Tennis Association (USLTA) sponsored several of its top players with under the table funds, but not Althea Gibson, even though she was the dominant woman player of the late 50s, winning five major titles - French Open (1956), Wimbledon (1957-58) and U.S. Open (1957-58). Queen Elizabeth II presented her with the 1957 Wimbledon trophy after she became the first African American to win Wimbledon and New York City honored her with a tickertape parade down Broadway. Gibson announced her retirement after capturing her second consecutive U.S. Open title and was honored with a New York ticker parade. On why she chose to retire while in her prime, Gibson said, “It was nice being the queen of tennis, but you can’t eat a crown.” She sang for a while, got bit parts in movies, including *The Horse Soldiers* and spent a few years as a player on the women’s pro golf tour. Althea won five major titles and Arthur won three: the U.S. Open (1968), Australian Open (1970) and Wimbledon (1975)). Twenty-four years later, Serena Williams joined them after winning her first U. S. Open (1999). Althea and Arthur are the only players inducted into the International Tennis Hall of Fame.”

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Althea Gibson and Arthur Ashe were exceptions. Gibson, unfortunately, could not get the help she needed to continue playing tennis. After her second US Open win, she quit tennis. She switched to golf. In high school, Smith's basketball friends thought it was crazy for him to play tennis. The first year he was the number 6 player on the team. There weren't indoor courts, so the summertime became the key time to work on skills. Smith would play tennis from late March to June and then in the summer.

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White high schools also did not have indoor courts. Phenix High School was on the campus of Hampton University, so Smith would play on the Hampton courts. Smith did not know of any public courts available to Blacks in Hampton at that time. They played in mostly shorts and t-shirts. Racquets and tennis balls were expensive. The school provided equipment to players on the team. "Whites" were required when they played matches. People in Smith's neighborhood did not play tennis. Smith talks about class distinction in the Black tennis community. Ashe could play at some white events, but he would have to find a place to stay. Members of the Black community would put him up and offer him support. Ashe

attending Dr. Johnson's summer tennis camp. Smith believes that there were Blacks who played informally.

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Smith's first integrated match. In high school, playing at Fort Eustis and in college playing against Northern colleges. In his first integrated games at Fort Eustis, Smith played a player in his 40, 50s. Smith won the match. Playing at Fort Eustis gave them an opportunity to play competitively since they were restricted from playing the best White high school players. Some of the players at Fort Eustis were top tennis players who had joined the army such as Billy Higgins and Norman Perry.

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Because of the integration of the armed services initiated by President Harry Truman, Smith believes that made it easier for Fort Eustis to be open to integrated matches. Smith was in the military after he graduated from college. He was in ROTC during college and had to fulfill his service duties. Smith mentions that there were ways that people opposed to integrated games would create challenges. One example, Ashe would be assigned to play a tournament in Maryland and would be told that he couldn't because his application was too late, even though it had been submitted months before.

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Smith trained with Dr. Johnson but not for as long as others. Dr. Johnson sponsored a national Black tournament where Smith got to the semi-finals. Players who got as far as the semi-finals were automatically invited to come to Dr. Johnson's camp. There were four who went to Dr. Johnson's that summer, Arthur Ashe, Joe Williams, Thomas Howes in 1960. Smith also had a job at a camp in Upstate New York so he was only able to stay at Dr. Johnson's for a week. In 1960 Smith played in an integrated tournament, The US Lawn tennis Association (USLTA) Interscholastic Championships. Ashe, Joe Williams, and Horace Cunningham also played. That was also the year that Ashe went to St. Louis for his senior year of high school. That year Ashe had qualified for the USLTA championship which he won. He was the first African American to win. It was held in Charlottesville Virginia. That year after Ashe won they moved the tournament to Boston.

**Additional note from Smith—"Dr. Johnson also invited John McGill, Louisville, Ky and James Bryant, my Phenix High School doubles partner, practiced with us but did not go to Charlottesville, Va for the integrated Interscholastic championships."

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Smith suggests that the move was racially motivated, moving north made it easier for Blacks to play. Spectators at the event were few and integrated. What it was like during his weeks at Dr. Johnson's. They practiced every day. Dr. Johnson gave them tasks to do as well. The week's training was to prepare the players for the USLTA championship. This was a big win for Dr. Johnson. Joe Williams, Thomas Hawes, A player named John from Kentucky, Horace Cunningham, James Bryant (did not go to Charlottesville), and others. Ashe was not there that week but joined them when they were going up for the event.

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All the players stayed at Dr. Johnson's house. First meeting Arthur Ashe. Ashe used to come to Smith's basketball games. Smith didn't get a good feel for Ashe the first time they met, but Ashe attended a party given by one of Smith's classmates and it was noticed that he had a good appetite. Smith had less contact with him in high school then in college. Smith was writing at this time. Smith would see him play and leave a note for Ashe and Ashe would respond. Smith would see Ashe at events in New York when he started working at Newsday. Both Smith and Ashe would note that their high school teachers were very committed throughout the south and that made it possible for them to excel in the way they did.

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Smith majored in mathematics in college because he didn't want to be a teacher but taught journalism at Hampton for five years. After graduating, Smith went into the army, during that time he met someone who led him to Newsday in 1970. At Newsday, he got into journalism. His beat was the town of Brookhaven in upstate New York. After a year on the news side, Smith switched to sports. He later went to the New York Post. And later he went to USA Today.

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The Kerner Commission was established to investigate the root causes of a series of riots across the country. It concluded that there are two Americans: one White and one Black. It concluded that inequality was the main factor and it concluded that a lack of diversity in media was also a problem. A lack of Black staff in media meant that it was difficult to get an inside perspective on the riots that were happening across the country. As a result media outlets opened their doors to Blacks. Smith noticed the difference.

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Smith covered news in the town in general, not just the African American community. Smith briefly left journalism to work at Howard University while his sons attended high school. Then returned to USA Today. Smith and Ashe stayed in touch. Ashe embarked on writing "A Hard Road To Glory" where he asked Smith to assist on the project. When a second edition was released, Ashe asked Smith to be the editor of that edition. During this time Ashe had a couple of heart attacks.

**Additional note from Smith-"I worked as Editor of Publications at Howard University Hospital for five years (1980-85) and joined USA Today in 1986. I took a one year leave of-absence from USA Today (1993-94) to accept a distinguished journalist chair at my alma mater, Hampton University."

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Smith describes the nature of his and Ashe's friendship. Smith talks about Ashe coming to dinner at his house. Ashe wanted him to meet Jeanne Moutoussamy, who he would later marry. Smith remembers being in Vietnam and Ashe visiting with the Davis Cup team in 1968. After Smith returned from Vietnam he saw Ashe. He attended Ashe's wedding. Ashe kept in touch with many of his childhood friends and with what was happening in the American Tennis Association (ATA).

**Additional note from Smith-"Billie Neilson and I were among several childhood friends who attended Ashe's (wedding) reception."

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Ashe's activism. Smith discusses journalist Les Payne and Ashe's trip to South Africa.

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Ashe's health issues. Smith was aware of Ashe's heart issues but not his HIV/AIDS status. Smith thought his physical condition was a result of his heart issues. In April 1992, Smith received a call about Ashe's status. Smith recalls meeting Ashe for dinner in 1991, he invited another sports media professional to join. He sensed that Ashe wanted to tell him something, but as there was another guest he didn't at that time. Smith talks about the difficulty of Ashe's disclosure and finds a spiritual meaning behind the series of events that lead to his disclosure. Smith mentions that soon after his disclosure Ashe utilized his time in a way that propelled his legacy in ways that may not have happened otherwise. Smith received a lot of hate mail after the disclosure.

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The climate and culture around HIV/AIDs at that time. The disease was stigmatized. Earvin "Magic" Johnson Jr. disclosed his status before Ashe. One difference was that Magic Johnson had HIV and Ashe had AIDS. Ashe knew that he had a short time to live.

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The media knew that Smith was involved in Ashe's disclosure. Smith describes how the conversation regarding USA Today proceeded. In talking with an editor of USA Today, Ashe did not disclose his status. USA Today was not going to publish without confirmation. Ashe stayed up that night keeping an eye on the news. When he realized that USA Today did not run the article he asked Smith to meet with him. He revealed to Smith what he planned to do, that he was going to disclose at a press conference. Frank Deford was present in the room as well but left leaving Ashe and Smith to talk. It was a tough conversation. Smith received emails both from Ashe and Jeanne Ashe stating that they did not blame Smith for this predicament. USA Today still wanted Smith to publish a piece on the topic, which Smith thinks people in Europe may have gotten before Ashe's press conference. This may be the reason that some thought that Smith didn't keep his word which he did. Rumors were spread about Smith.

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Smith doesn't remember any of the responses to what had happened to be racialized. Smith did speak to three journalists about the incident: Les Payne (Newsday), Tony Kornheiser (Washington Post), and Richard Prince (Richard Prince Journal-isms). Payne and Kornheiser wrote columns on the topic.

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Smith did receive some calls of support from his journalism community. In the last few years of Ashe's life, Smith was living in Washington DC and Ashe in New York, so they didn't see each other as much as in the past but they did stay in touch. Smith talks about the last time he called Ashe, five days before he passed away.

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Ashe and Smith stayed in touch after Ashe's disclosure. Smith describes a moment at the French Open when Ashe mentioned Smith finishing "A Hard Road To Glory." Smith recalls having a meal together at Wimbledon and at an ATA meeting. Most of their time together was spent working on the book.

**Additional note from Smith-"Ashe made it clear to me that he wanted me to continue working with him on "A Hard Road to Glory" at the 1992 Wimbledon (not the French Open)."

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Smith learned of Ashe passing from a friend. He attended the funeral in Richmond, Virginia. Smith wrote a second column on Ashe at this time. Smith describes Ashe's legacy. Ashe's influence goes so far beyond his achievements in tennis. Ashe quote "What we get we can make a living, but what we give we can make a life." Dr. Robert Walter Johnson's impact on Ashe's life. Smith discusses what Ashe meant to him personally.