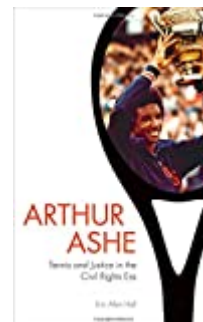


Eric Allen Hall. *Arthur Ashe: Tennis and Justice in the Civil Rights Era.* Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014. 344 pp. \$34.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-4214-1394-5.



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Racial Consciousness On and Off the Tennis Court

With *Arthur Ashe: Tennis and Justice in the Civil Rights Era*, Eric Allen Hall offers a welcome and timely scholarly biography of one of US tennis's most important revolutionaries. One gets the impression that both Hall and Ashe in particular may shy away from such a strong description. Even so *Arthur Ashe* makes clear that, while Ashe was not necessarily a trailblazer for African American involvement in US sport or even just tennis—he followed Bob Ryland and Anthea Gibson onto the courts and athletes like Jackie Robinson, Jessie Owens, and Joe Louis are all cited by Hall as predecessors—he, along perhaps with Muhammad Ali, was among the first African American athletes to realize his potential to promote social change through political activism.[1] Athletic success gave him a voice which he could use to do this.

Hall's book, surprisingly, is the first of its kind published about Ashe. While Ashe wrote four memoirs alongside ghostwriters, as well as the groundbreaking, if flawed, *A Hard Road to Glory: A History of the African-American Athlete* (1993), published across three volumes, there have been only a handful of nonacademic biogra-

phies written since his death in 1993. Hall is able to interweave and contextualize Ashe's athletic achievements, his intellectual nature, and his various politically driven actions: autobiographies and sporting histories have been unable to reconcile honestly these facets of his personality. Hall's meticulous research of extensive archival materials allows him to uncover the complexities of Ashe's relationship with his own athleticism and race. Indeed, the archival sources he uses are remarkable. In addition to a thorough survey of contemporary journalism in three countries, Hall has made use of forty-two boxes of Ashe's personal papers located in the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture. This kind of collection is almost unique in sports history and Hall's capable use of it lends *Arthur Ashe* a depth of private detail unprecedented among athletic biographies, scholarly or otherwise.

Hall successfully parses this extensive archive to provide a unified narrative of a life that, Janus-faced, was consistently interesting to journalists writing in the front and back of daily newspapers around the world. Hall,

like Ashe, shows that sporting success and political efficacy are two sides of the same coin and, equally, draws on a good knowledge of a wide and varied set of cultural contexts to demonstrate this collaboration. These contexts include, but are not limited to, the social history of tennis, the civil rights movement and black power, the apartheid movement in South Africa and in the United States, and African Americans in sport. *Arthur Ashe*, though, is best viewed as a historical document in its own right. Meticulous, honest, and straightforward, the book itself might act as a tool by which other cultural critics, building on Hall's research, can bring refreshed and renewed attention to this intersection between sport and political activism, racial or otherwise. The familiar refrain that sport and politics should not mix is persistent to the present day punctuates Ashe's experiences and Hall's book. Plainly, despite the gains made by Ashe, this absurd assertion is one still leveled at athletes in the twenty-first century. For example, in 2014, Detroit Lions running back Reggie Bush was accused by ESPN and the *Washington Post* of being outspoken after a series of incidents in which he offered his support to campaigns in New York and Ferguson, Missouri, protesting police violence against Michael Brown.[2]

Perhaps the episode that best illuminates Ashe's moderate, resourceful, and committed approach to the struggle for race equality comes right at the beginning of his career. While in his freshman year at UCLA, the tennis team was, as usual, invited to an annual tournament at the Balboa Bay Club with Ashe's name conspicuously absent from the list of players. Ashe's coach, J. D. Morgan assured him that the team was willing to boycott the tournament on his behalf if Ashe instructed them to do so. Morgan's advice, quoted in Ashe's third memoir *Off The Court* (1981) and reproduced by Hall, became a succinct mantra for Ashe's approach to protest more widely: "You can't make it a little issue. If you want to fight something like [the Balboa exclusion], you have to fight it to win it. And you have to prepare for it, get your ducks in order so to speak" (p. 48).

Hall is critical of Morgan's insistence that Ashe received the authority to decide whether the whole team should boycott the tournament. Hall suggests that at such an early position in his career, Ashe could not possibly have been so outspoken nor could he have imposed his struggle onto his teammates without their explicit agreement and that, moreover, Morgan absolved himself of the responsibilities of leadership. However, in transferring this responsibility to Ashe, Morgan in fact estab-

lished a template for reserved and considered protest that informed all of Ashe's later activism. The fingerprints of this advice are clear, for example, when Ashe was finally granted a visa to compete in the South African Open during apartheid's peak years. He was keenly aware that the public debates with black journalists, meetings with leaders of the white and black communities, and the journeys to Soweto would have no effect if he did not also compete admirably in the tournament. He finished second, knocking out two white South Africans in the process.

At a historical moment in which athletic activism appears to be at a low ebb, *Arthur Ashe*, above all, offers a timely opportunity to revisit a man who, in his words, "could be the reactionary nigger and the revolutionary Uncle Tom" (p. 50). A moderate through and through, Ashe was consistently able to create and inspire change by degrees in attitudes and in legislation. While it is apparent that US sport generally and tennis specifically is increasingly comfortable with black athletes (while an African American has not won a Grand Slam tournament since Ashe, the Williams sisters have been prolific), the same is certainly not true for gay athletes. The recent experiences of Jason Collins, Michael Sam, and Darren Young demonstrate that the struggle for equality in sport still has some way to go. Ashe's middle way might offer athletes of color and other minority sportsmen and sportswomen a blueprint to reclaim their public lives from an accusatory sporting media still betrothed to the idea that any bleed between sports and politics is outspoken as opposed to ordinary.

Notes

[1]. Unlike Ashe, works on Ali and his personal brand of activism are numerous. Gerald Early, *I am a Little Bit Special: A Muhammad Ali Reader* (London: Yellow Jersey, 1999) is perhaps the best start.

[2]. Cindy Boren, "Reggie Bush Protests Eric Garner Decision with 'I Can't Breathe' Shirt," *Washington Post*, December 7, 2014, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/early-lead/wp/2014/12/07/reggie-bush-protests-eric-garner-decision-with-i-cant-breathe-shirt/>; and Michael Rothstein, "Reggie Bush Wears Protest Shirt," *ESPN.com*, December 8, 2014, http://espn.go.com/nfl/story/_/id/11993093/reggie-bush-detroit-lions-wears-breathe-shirt-game.

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