

King Arthur

The Perfect Match, From Liverpool to Hollywood

23000 fans at the Arthur Ashe Stadium watched two female black players compete in the quarter final of the 2008 US Open on Wednesday night. Serena and Venus Williams had captured the anticipation of the media as the two sisters played out the match worthy of a final, Serena winning 7-6 7-6.

Most of the fans in the stadium would be unaware that over 50 years ago a young white Jewish lady called Angela Buxton sacrificed a winning position against a black girl, Althea Gibson, eventual winner at the 1956 French Open in the semi finals. Angela Buxton was to be one of the first to publicly fight against racism in sport to the detriment of her own career. The world wide tennis public could have been robbed of William sisters talents if it was not for individuals like Angela Buxton.

In 1956 two outsiders: a Jewish girl, Angela Buxton from England and a black girl, Althea Gibson from the USA, made sports history when they won the Wimbledon Women's Doubles; Althea was the first black player ever to win the Wimbledon and US Open singles later Angela Buxton, also reached the singles finals and was the first and only female Jewish player to win a Wimbledon title.

Says Liverpool born Angela, who these days divides her time between her Manchester and her Florida homes. "Manchester is like my creative engine room for all my world-wide projects. Its more than just an office.". Angela's tennis career started when a coach from Liverpool would teach tennis to Angela every Sunday evening at her school.

'Bob Mulligan would come to my school from Liverpool dressed in his smart long cream flannels and shirt to match as they wore in those days. He was a good looking man. All the girls had a crush on him. I had a 15 minute lesson a week from him. After two lessons Mr Mulligan spoke to my Mother and informed her that I had above average talent for my age. I was 12 at the time.'

'She needs to be playing a few tournaments he told my Mother.

'My Mother was not from a tennis family and said ' What do you mean , Wimbledon?'

"No" replied Mulligan "but there are a host of junior tournaments along the coast in August from Crosby to Southport.

In the summer of 1948 Angela competed in one of the junior tournaments to which he referred, in Hightown. She would stay at her Mother's sister's house in Southport

'Mr Mulligan had arranged a practice session at his club in Blundesands and he must have talked to all the members about me. I had not played for a month and there was a large crowd waiting to see me. I was so embarrassed, throwing the ball up and missing it completely - I shall never FORGET it!. But I did get better.'

'At the Hightown tournament I not only won the under 14's but also the under 15 handicap and under 18 handicap events. I actually never lost a match during that first tournament in which I played!....some record!!'

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Angela later moved to London with her Mother.

She was not allowed to join the Cumberland Tennis Club in London because of her religion.

This did not deter her. 'It was water off a ducks back to me.' She said.

As the quote from Golda Meir said 'A dog who trots finds a bone.'

At 74 years young today Angela is charging through life in the style of thoroughbred, finding many 'bones.' She is sharing her knowledge and experience. In demand on and off the court. A public speaker, co-author of books, tennis consultant, journalist and broadcaster as well as a charity fundraiser, Angela will be making a presentation at the Jewish Museum in Miami on September 11th 2008.

'I will be talking about what it was like as a Jewish participant in sport in the 1950s and on October the 16th the Jewish Museum is showing the documentary 'The Perfect Match' said Angela.

She helped co- produced the documentary film about Althea Gibson and herself called 'The Perfect Match.' Produced by Rachel Viollet and Besty Blankenbaker. It was shown at 'The International Newport Film Festival' Rhode Island, USA in June of this year.

It is a story of a struggle against prejudice, the colour of skin and religion. These barriers were gradually broken down as Angela doggedly forged forward in life and today black players, such as the Williams sisters have benefited from Althea and Angela's stance in the 1950s against racism and bigotry.

Her Hollywood film script is being written by Paul Castro and Shirley McLaine has been approached to play Angela as she is to-day. The producers are Rachel Viollet and Besty Blackenbaker

There where many twists of fate in Angela's life. In Los Angeles, USA, she was to come against anti semitism again.

'All the best players where from California so my Father sent me there with my Mother. I joined the Los Angeles tennis club but my membership was terminated and my money refunded after they found out I was Jewish. In those days no Jews could join the club.' said Angela.

(The head of Warner studios 'Jack Warner' was also refused membership to the Los Angeles Club years ago.)

'I was introduced to La Cienega public tennis courts. Big Bill Tilden, Pancho Gonzales and Pancho Segura, all wonderful players frequented La Cienega public courts for one reason or another, having been barred from The Los Angeles Tennis Club.'

Angela would train with the legendary tennis great Bill Tilden for six months.

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Bill Tilden coached Angela on Charlie Chaplin's private tennis court with the Hollywood movie stars of the day watching, notably Katherine Hepburn and Walter Pigeon. They would ball boy for her while she practiced.

Angela was to play her first match back on English soil. It was not to be a Hollywood dream debut but the cold reality of a humiliating defeat to Doris Hart, from the USA the reigning Wimbledon ladies singles champion that left Angela depressed and doubting her ability.

Someone once said, Wimbledon champions are like London buses, if you miss one don't worry another one will soon arrive.

A bus stop in Bournemouth, England, the year 1953 was to change the path of a young girl's life. It was not a bus that arrived but a car, offering her ride back to the hotel.

The young girl standing at the bus stop was Liverpool born Angela Buxton. The person who invited Angela into the car was a former Great Britain Davis Cup tennis player and a world wide respected journalist called Clarence Medlycott 'Jimmy' Jones. Jones gave Angela belief and nurtured her tennis skills that had not yet fully developed at that moment.

Angela reminisces about that time waiting for a bus back to the hotel
'I had just lost 6-0 6-0 to the reigning Wimbledon singles champion, Doris Hart from the USA in the British hard court championships. It was the second biggest tournament outside Wimbledon in those days. I then went to get the bus after the match and a car stopped, a beaten-up-old Jaquar car. This man said can I give you a lift. I thought to myself he was an old man. He was all of 41 years of age. What is he doing with me?'

'He said it's okay, I've just come from the press room and you are going to get crucified tomorrow morning by every newspaper but I feel you have something to offer and I can help you. Don't worry what you will see in the press.'
'I thought to myself this is a fine line. I've heard so many chat up lines having been in the USA for six months training. He then gave me his card and said if you decide give me a call at my Fleet Street office. I took the lift in trepidation and forgot all about it.'

Angela was ready to retire after that match but friends at the Chandos Lawn tennis club in Golders Green, London, encouraged her to play in the Maccabiah games in Israel.

'I was a member there for 24 years and I still have friends there today. These friends were not part of the tennis circuit but they were quite good players. The trials for the Maccabiah games were held there and I qualified.'
'I joined the Chandos Lawn Tennis club after being refused membership at the prestigious Cumberland tennis club because they did not accept Jews.'
'I won the tennis tournament in Israel defeating Anita Kanter 6-3 6-1 in the final. Anita Kanter was ranked No.9; in the world at that time, and had defeated none other than Wimbledon Champion Doris Hart directly before arriving in Israel in the August.

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This gave Angela the impetus that she had the talent to keep going forward. She was to contact C.M 'Jimmy' Jones and developed into a deeply meaningful friendship that was to last for 33 years until his death in 1986.

(Angela was to later to return CM 'Jimmy Jones' kindness when he became ill. She would nurse him in his later days.)

'It was in the fall (autumn) maybe. I thought I would call that old codger. I had no tennis coach at the time and no one had offered.'

'He coached me at the back of his office, Lincoln Inn Fields where Barristers and clerks would watch during there lunch hour.'

'C.M Jones corrected my strokes. For example I had difficulty hitting forehands cross-court. He taught me how to hit a forehands cross-court without me knowing doing it. He was a very smart man. By Christmas I was beating opponents I had never defeated before.'

This unconventional meeting was to assist Angela become a Wimbledon singles finalist, Wimbledon doubles winner and French open doubles winner in 1956.

Unfortunately Angela was never able achieved another major after 1956. A wrist injury a few weeks later ended her tennis career.

Tennis is an insular profession of egos and the need to gain any advantage on and off the court. A player is immersed in a result driven world and the only defining moment is the voice of the umpire announcing their name 'Game set and match' This is the bottom line for every player on the tennis tour. What is unusual is when someone shows a humanitarian gesture at the most unexpected moment.

Just as Jimmy Jones had helped Angela, she would do the same in tennis and life. Sitting in the presence of an elegant and articulate lady you can sense her altruistic nature is in her blood. There is a burning life force in her blue eyes that radiates the room but at the same time Angela has that air of a 'headmistress with authority' as she talks but with a welcoming heart.

While playing in the 1956 French Open semi final, Angela was one set up and a 4-2 lead against Althea Gibson when she escorted Gibson off the court when her bra strap snapped Angela could have had Althea defaulted and advanced to the final. In those day players were not allowed to leave the court.

Angela explained what happened,

'Although I was leading a set and 4 - 2. I felt so sorry for this girl. Her bra strap had broken and she was on the cusp of big time here. I was too but I felt more for her. Althea called me to the net and said her bra strap was broken. I said don't worry and put my arm around her and we both walked off the court go to the locker room. I never gave a thought to the fact that we both mght be disqualified by leaving the court. We both came back 15 minutes later and carried on the match. Although I was in a leading position. I lost the 6-4 in the third set.'

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Both players teamed up to win the French Open, and Wimbledon doubles titles of that year. They remained friends until Althea died in 2003 at the age of 76.

This would not be the only time Angela would come to the rescue of Althea. In 1995 Angela answered a phone call for help from Althea.

Althea Gibson had fallen on hard times. She was behind in rent and needed to pay for medical bills and was finding it hard to carry on with life. Althea suggested ending her life but Angela quickly talked her out of such thoughts and immediately sent her 1500 dollars, much needed financial help to quell Althea's negative thoughts.

Through Angela's perseverance, contacts and help from another American journalist Paul Fein, the tennis world was made aware of Althea's very poor circumstances. A million dollars was raised etc.

The word got out about Althea Gibson and a million dollars was raised with donations from tennis fans in the USA and around the world. Angela dismisses it as just another act of friendship.

'I've been a Maverick and always will be. I get more joy helping people. Being forced to retire from tennis I was able to overcome the disappointment, learn new activities and move on.' Angela said.

Bud Collins, well known tennis writer and broadcaster for NBC named her the 'Florence Nightingale' of tennis, others have said she is a 'Mother Teresa' for people in need of help.

To this day Angela Buxton has not been invited to join the All England Club in London, England and maybe our cousins on the other side of the pond could induct her into the Tennis International Hall of Fame, Newport USA.

Tributes and Honours seem to happen when the recipient is no longer alive.

A final thought is a quote from someone about posthumous awards, 'I feel that a good number of these posthumous awards are presented more to alleviate guilt of not recognizing these people while they were alive, more than honouring any memory that we may have of them'

What is wrong with honouring them when they are still alive?