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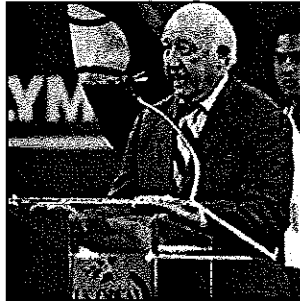
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Simply Bud

USTA Salutes Althea Gibson
 by Glenn Minnis
 Tuesday, September 7, 2004

The sultry night air stood still, suspended by the awe that bore the moment. The entire atmosphere, in fact, seemed filled with warmth and reverence, bringing about acts of emotion ranging from thunderous applause to quiet reflection.



Remembering Althea

And yet among the thousands upon thousands of fans that packed Arthur Ashe Stadium Tuesday night for the ninth evening of the US Open, what was happening appeared obvious. The spirit of Althea Gibson was there. Mind you, alive and well.

On a night when 22-year-old Serena Williams looked to move forward in earning her second Open title in the last five years, Althea Gibson, based on her barrier-breaking feats some 50-years before, was memorialized in a pre-game ceremony as the "African-American Mother of Tennis."



Gibson The Great

USTA Chairman of the Board and President Alan G. Schwartz, along with Executive Director and Chief Operating Officer Lee Hamilton and Chief Executive of Professional Tennis Arlen Kantarian, unveiled a commemorative plaque celebrating Gibson's legacy.

"Althea is the reason we've all had a chance to make a life of playing the game we love," said Zina Garrison, who with advice from Gibson over the years was able to parlay a 15-year career into 14 singles titles, 20 doubles crown and nearly \$5 million in prize money. "Venus, Serena (Williams), Chanda (Rubin), Angela (Haynes) -- it's amazing, even though she's no longer with us, she's still touching lives for the better. We are because of her."



Tribute to Althea

And how ironic is that, given all the turmoil and struggle that often symbolized Gibson's existence. She was born in Silver, S.C., and moved to Harlem when she just three-years-old. At 14, she took up tennis and a year later was winning her first all-black American Tennis Association title, the only circuit she was allowed on compete on then. It would be another seven years before she would get her chance to play against white players for the first time, and another year before her first US National Championships (now the US Open).

In 1956, she won the French Championships, the first of her seven Grand Slam singles titles, even though she was still routinely being denied hotel lodging whenever she traveled. Against such a backdrop -- not to mention a mounting Civil Rights movement -- Gibson won 10 more titles before the decade ended. Among them were back-to-back National Championships and a Wimbledon crown.

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"If Arthur Ashe climbed a hill, Althea Gibson climbed a mountain," Schwartz told Tuesday night's crowd, as a montage of clips featuring Gibson in action played on a huge overhead monitor.

"She overcame challenges unimaginable to me and I'm sure many others," added tennis legend John McEnroe, who was on hand for the ceremony alongside former New York City mayor, USTA Board of Directors Director at Large and lifelong Gibson friend, David N. Dinkins.

Even after she was done as a player, Gibson continued to trumpet the merits of athletics in the lives of women, serving as the New Jersey State Commissioner of Athletics.

"It's funny, Althea's the reason I wanted to play tennis but she's also one of the reasons I almost gave it up," Garrison recalled. "I remember when I was 14 and I went to work with her, she worked me so hard that I told myself I was done. I actually quit playing for about three weeks."

Clearly, that's the legacy of Althea Gibson: hard work, excellence, perseverance. In 1958, she penned her autobiography entitled "I Always Wanted To Be Somebody."

Althea Gibson can rest assured her words became gospel. There's a whole list of her followers to prove it.



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