

# World Tennis Gazette

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## Arthur Ashe's Legacy: Death and Revival in South Africa

*How Two Men — One Black, One White — Restored a Lost Opportunity*

By JOHN MARTIN  
SOWETO, South Africa — Unnoticed by the outside world, part of Arthur Ashe's legacy — a tennis center for black South Africans — descended into decay and ruin long before his death in 1993.

In just a few years after its opening in 1976, vandals tore apart fences and ransacked the clubhouse. Neighbors dumped garbage and refuse on the grounds.

In March, 1977, Ashe and his bride, Jeanne Moutoussamy-Ashe, stood on the grounds and surveyed the damage. Their dream of tennis at the core of Africa's largest township had become a nightmare of crime and decay.

But today, still largely unseen by outsiders, the Arthur R. Ashe Jr. Tennis Center has been brought back from the grave to the brink of revival. Behind its rebirth are two men: Ian Smith, a mild-mannered, conservatively dressed white sports executive, and Bongani Zondi, a bold, leather-jacketed black political



Ian Smith

activist with the nickname of Wire.

Their teamwork, assisted by top South African political and sports figures, has surmounted a series of daunting obstacles and reflects, in a modest way, the kind of racial collaboration Ashe dreamed of in his lifetime.

When it was dedicated,



Bongani (Wire) Zondi

the Ashe Center was intended to inspire black Africans to emulate a black American. Ashe's victory at Wimbledon in 1975 was a catalyst.

**Editor's Note:**  
This story appeared in *The New York Times* on August 25, 2007 in condensed form.

But within months of a fanfare dedication of its eight courts, the country headed into dark days of repression. On June 16, 1976, 23 Soweto students died in a

hail of gunfire while protesting Afrikaner language requirements. A long struggle was getting underway.

In 1984, tennis-playing residents restored the courts, but vandals struck again and the property fell back into decay — and disrepute.

"It became a dumping ground for dead dogs and animal carcasses," said Zondi, a Johannesburg city councilman who represents the Jabavu neighborhoods of Soweto, where he was born in 1959.

"It was a place of crime, a problem for the community," Zondi said.

"During those days, people didn't care about facilities, they didn't care if they were vandalized or not," said Zondi. "We were intensifying our struggle to resist the government."

For Zondi, the fight was personal: He went underground to recruit members for the banned African National Congress. Capture could have



Photomural., Arthur Ashe Tennis Centre, Soweto



John Martin Photos for World Tennis Gazette

**DECAY AND REVIVAL:** Where weeds and trash once cluttered grounds, cement benches line sides of eight refinished tennis courts at Arthur Ashe Tennis Centre in Soweto, South Africa, reopened after many years.

## From Ruins: South Africans Revive Arthur Ashe Tennis Center

meant years in prison.

"I was never arrested," he said. "I always managed to run away, but it was very difficult."

When the country staged a peaceful election and transition to majority rule in the 1990s, Zondi became a body-guard, first to protect Nelson Mandela, then Thabo Mbeki, the current chief executive.

In 2000, after Zondi won a seat on the city council, developers were hungrily circling the tennis center. They wanted to buy the land for a shopping mall.

"I refused," Zondi said. "I wanted to recognize the late Arthur Ashe, to honor his contributions."

To be sure, Zondi had a broader purpose than simple homage to Ashe: A successful revival of the tennis center, he reasoned, could revitalize the township's battered social infrastructure. He wanted to make the center a magnet for Soweto's sports-minded youngsters, hungry for athletic achievement and desperate for academic assistance.

These same emotions of hunger and desperation swirled through Soweto when Ashe visited South Africa in 1973, an event resisted for four years by the Afrikaner government. Ashe's appearance had an electrifying impact.

"His (Ashe's) condemnations of apartheid made him one of us," wrote Mark Mathabane in *Kaffir Boy*, his 1986 account of growing up in minority-ruled South Africa.

Ashe, wrote Mathabane, "did not pretend he was a white man erroneously painted black."

For a capable young black tennis player like Mathabane, the way out was to go up in the manner of Ashe. In 1978, when a college tennis scholarship arrived from America, he took it, escaping poverty and repression. Today he lives with his family in Portland, Oregon, where he writes and lectures. "The fact that Ashe could look a white man in the eye and that he could speak his mind" was an inspiration, Mathabane said.

In Zondi's reasoning, Ashe's legacy created an opening to expand the tennis center into a complex for sports and scholarship. It would be opened as a



**STUDY CENTER: Modern library for use by Soweto's adults and youngsters within the grounds of a revived Arthur Ashe Tennis Centre, reopened in March.**

resource to all in the community.

As a start, he went to see the man whose life he once guarded. Mandela, the nation's revered father figure, suggested a meeting with Dr. Ali Bacher, who ran the country's world-class cricket establishment.

"He didn't know me," Zondi said, "but he was willing to meet and talk."

And act.

With Zondi at their side, Bacher and Smith, then deputy director of the cricket association, approached the national lottery and the provincial government. The three men wrote

letters, met with public officials, and won a lottery grant of 3.5 million Rand (\$494,000). Then, using Bacher's name, Zondi raised 4 million Rand (about \$565,000) from the province's public works ministry to build two vocational training facilities and a library.

Still, even with money in hand, Zondi faced appalling conditions at the tennis center.

"The fences were gone, even the net poles were taken," said Smith, who joined the South African Tennis Association in March, 2004. "It was terrible."

A month after Smith joined the association as its chief executive officer, Zondi saw an opportunity. He wrote a letter asking for help. It was his second attempt. Four years earlier, the association ignored a similar request.

"I telephoned him straight away," said Smith, a soft-spoken sports executive.

Somehow, the two men formed a bond: Smith, born in Zambia and bred in the privileged precincts of the white world (his family moved to South Africa when he was 12), and Zondi, born and reared in the seedy, twilight world of Soweto.

Oddly, neither had a personal stake in tennis. As a young man, Smith played in a premier professional cricket league. Zondi played club soccer at the semi-professional level.

But tennis and what it might accomplish for young South Africans in Soweto drew them together.

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## Arthur Ashe: “You Have to Really Learn to Depend on Yourself.”

In interviews with Morley Safer of CBS News's *60 Minutes*, Arthur Ashe talked of the role of tennis — and tennis centers — in the lives of young black children. The purpose was learning, he said, not enhancing performance:

“A lot of people want me to put racquets in the hands of as many black tennis players as possible. I think that's a waste of my time. If I see some young, talented blacks whom I think would have a chance to make it on the pro tour, at the right age, yes. I would offer them all the help I could give them.

“But I think the much larger task for me is to debunk the myth, the illusion that young black kids have that they can be a Doctor J or an O.J. Simpson or a Kareem Abdul Jabbar or a Reggie Jackson. Because far too many of our young black kids harbor this dream, ah, too long in their life. And they wind up with neither the education nor that pro contract.

“That's one of the reasons where (sic) I spend a lot of my off-court time visiting black colleges and universities.

“We need more black lawyers, we need more black doctors, we're just begging for black engineers.”

“The tennis center in my mind is really ah, a means of socializing the



**Photo of Arthur Ashe displayed at All-England Lawn Tennis Club of the “1975 Gentlemen's Champion”.**

youth who use it. To help build character, self confidence, enhance their self image.

“It specifically is not necessarily in place to produce professional players or even to win scholarships; if one does, that's fine, but certainly the lessons that one can learn, playing an individual sport like tennis, where once play starts, there are no substitutions, no timeouts, no coaching. Those are very solid life lessons that anyone would do well to learn.

“You have to numerically look at the cold hard facts that very, very, very few of the players who come through the tennis center are going to play professionally. Very, very few. I don't care how good you are.

“I always like to tell kids, even with those who are aspiring to advanced play, no matter how good you are, when they start ranking players, whether in the men, or the women, the juniors, the various age categories, there's only room in the top ten for ten.

“And, that means that, they have to realistically set their aspirations and goals and that just because they may at age 11 or 12 have wanted to be a professional player and they find out realistically at age 16 or 17 it ain't gonna happen, but there are a lot of things that they could have learned in the interim.

“Maybe they did win a scholarship, ah, to a college, and maybe the college is say as good as a place like Penn or Stanford or UCLA or Columbia. But it may be a school which plays Division 2 tennis, but regardless, ah, there are some lessons that one can learn out there all by yourself on a tennis court with no substitutions, no timeouts, and no coaches.

“You have to really learn to depend upon yourself, you have to learn to be, become self-sufficient. Ah, you have to learn how to make instantaneous decisions that are going to affect the result of the rest of that match. Life is like that, no question about it.”

**CBS News 60 Minutes  
Video clips at [arthurashe.org](http://arthurashe.org)**

## A Library Rises Steps Away from Ashe's Beloved Tennis Courts

Within months, they persuaded the black-ruled city of Johannesburg to contribute 1 million Rand (about \$140,000), earmarking it to revive the tennis center.

“I sold it to the people in my district with the promise that 90 per cent of the labor would come from the community” of Soweto, said Zondi.

In a second breakthrough, officials at the national lottery agreed to grant the effort 3.5 million Rand (\$494,000).

“The money came to the South African Tennis Association,” said Smith, who explained that the arrangement was crafted to avoid any inference that Zondi would benefit personally from the grants.

In March of this year, the center

held an official opening. Among the guests was Ashe's widow, Jeanne Moutoussamy-Ashe.

“She was crying,” Zondi said. Accompanied by officials from the U.S. Embassy, Moutoussamy-Ashe delivered a gift of books from Ashe's 3,000-volume collection, pledged to send a large photo of Ashe to be mounted in the clubhouse, and promised to donate some of his trophies, said Zondi.

“It was a very emotional visit for me,” said Moutoussamy-Ashe, who praised Smith and Bacher for their enthusiasm and called Zondi “incredible and inspiring.”

From the clubhouse, she saw an astonishing renaissance.

The eight tennis courts had been re-

surfaced and restored to mint condition with rows of new spectator benches.

A modern yellow-and-red brick library building, for which Zondi raised an extra 9 million Rand (nearly \$1.3 million), had risen near the front security gates.

Inside, the visitors saw bays for computers and stations for compact disks, a wall of 50 lockers beside a play/study area for younger children, and space for about 120 adults to hold meetings and read or study.

Seeing the library, said Moutoussamy-Ashe, was the “most satisfying and inspiring part of the visit.”

She was stunned to find it “just steps away from the exact same spot Arthur had built the courts 30 years before. I can not think of a more fitting tribute to Arthur

## Reviving a Tennis Center Where Southern Africans May Compete

or to the people of Soweto. Arthur would have been so honored and extremely proud.”

Next to the library stand two new structures to teach vocational skills, one for sewing, the other for cooking.

“People have to have a reason to go to the facility,” Zondi said. “They can go to study. The tennis courts are for when they are tired and don’t want to read any more books.”

For now, the grounds are eerily quiet. And the courts sit empty without nets.

“I have the nets,” said Thami Nkosi, the facilities manager, reassuring a visitor. They are stored away for tournaments and play, he explained.

Day and night, three-man squads of security guards patrol buildings and grounds, posted as sentinels to prevent a recurrence of vandalism.

When it is complete, Zondi insists, there will be plenty of activity.

“It’s no use to have a facility if it isn’t used,” Zondi said as we walked the grounds, which will ultimately include two basketball courts, a swimming pool, a soccer field. Already in place, nearby, is a boxing ring and weight training facility.

“It’s like a sports prison,” he quipped, acknowledging his penchant for security fencing and strict entrance standards to prevent a recurrence of vandalism.

“Wrong isn’t ever right,” he told several workers responsible for administering the rules to hundreds of schoolchildren and adults who will be visiting the library and skills centers.

“I still have to arrange the Consent to Use permit,” Zondi said, explaining that the city government retains ownership as part of the financing arrangement.

Zondi’s plan, sketched out to a visitor during a tour of the center and at lunch, involves at least three key objectives:

Prevent vandalism, find the money to hire a full-time coach and development director, and recruit sponsors to stage a high-profile tennis competition.



**SECURITY:** At Zondi’s direction, the Ashe Tennis Centre is secured behind wire fences and patrolled around the clock to prevent vandals from breaking in. A renovated clubhouse in background overlooks what Zondi says he hopes will be an enlarged section featuring eight additional courts.

“We want to hold a regional tournament,” Zondi said. Players from Botswana, Swaziland, Zimbabwe, Mozambique would compete in Soweto with players from South Africa.

An ATP event, with its hundreds of thousands of dollars in prize money and heavy logistical demands for television and media coverage, seems out of the question for many years.

“But a Futures or Challenger might be possible,” said an official of the Association of Tennis Professionals, speaking informally.

At the moment, the ATP is attempting to bring a full-scale tournament to South Africa, “but we haven’t walked it across the line, yet,” said the official.

An international tennis tournament backed by high gloss international sponsors and dropped into the mean streets of Soweto might be jarring to watch on television.

But Zondi seems unfazed by the challenge and unswerving in his belief that a revived tennis center in full operational swing will transform Soweto’s self-image

and repair its sports ethos, damaged by years of neglect.

“Once the children see the interest” generated by a major tournament, he said, “they will come.”

Smith said he is aiming to attract either a Davis Cup match or Federation Cup competition. “We could have 16 women’s teams here, possibly next year,” he said, “But we have to get the funds first and we’ll need to have 10 to 12 courts to stage the event.”

For now, tennis is only beginning to rise from the dead. A Soweto Tennis Association is helping players form clubs. A few small junior tournaments have been held at the center (the nets were retrieved and put away afterward). To revive fully, Zondi conceded, will take a major additional fundraising effort. But it will pay off, he insisted.

“If we can get \$100,000 for our training programs, I say that in five or six years, we’ll have our kids playing grand slam tournament tennis.”

If that became the center’s sole purpose, of course, it would conflict with the goals of the man in whose name the effort is being undertaken.

Before his death, Ashe told *60 Minutes* that he saw tennis as a means of building character and self confidence among players who would never climb to the heights of world competition.

“Very, very, very few” will gain even high rankings, Ashe emphasized, and college tennis scholarships, while useful, were secondary.

Instead, once a match begins, he said: “there are some lessons that one can learn out there all by yourself on a tennis court with no substitutions, no timeouts, and no coaches.”

Depending solely on oneself and making crucial, instantaneous decisions in a match, Ashe reminded his listeners, instill “very solid life lessons that anyone would do well to learn.”

In Soweto, it appears, many of the lessons have been learned and applied to help revive Arthur Ashe’s legacy.