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# ***World Tennis Gazette***

## **The Envelope, Please**

**How A Handwritten Note Led Arthur Ashe to an Epic Upset of Jimmy Connors at Wimbledon**

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By JOHN MARTIN  
NEW YORK ·  
Jimmy Connors was in a hurry.

On the third day of the 2010 U.S. Open, Connors was carrying a dark sport coat over his left arm as he scurried along a corridor beneath the Arthur Ashe Tennis Stadium.

Jimmy, a reporter said, can I ask you a question about your famous 1975 Wimbledon final with Arthur Ashe?+

Famed for who?+, he said. Not famed for me!+he growled.

Turning a corner, Connors picked up speed and headed for a doorway that leads toward a bank of elevators that carry broadcast journalists high above the Ashe Stadium court.

It was so long ago,+, he said, adjusting the knot in his tie and turning his head slightly to be heard over his shoulder, can I even remember it!+

Connors moves with speed and dash, so it was hard to tell whether he spoke from mischief or amusement. He was gone before the words settled on the astonished reporter

What is clear is that a



**VICTORY AT WIMBLEDON:** "I called him 'Lieutenant' when I wanted his attention," said Donald Dell, who wrote Ashe a note.

tennis match that was epic in its dimensions and shocking in its result took place between Ashe and Connors 35 years ago this summer. What has been forgotten is that until the moment of his victory, Ashe's reputation as a ten-

nis player was well on its way to crumbling.

Ashe does not want to win badly enough,+, wrote Barry Lorge, a former editor of *World Tennis* magazine. He does not devote enough time to tennis to realize his potential, does

not think on the court, and chokes.+

That appraisal - blunt, painful, and believed by his peers - was written on the very day Ashe reversed his critics' perceptions and scored one of the most improbable victories in the history of tennis.

On the Centre Court grass of the All England Lawn Tennis Club, Ashe, nearly 32 years old, defeated Connors, ten years younger, 6-1, 6-1, 5-7, 6-4 for the 1975 Wimbledon title.

The strategy for the victory rested in a handwritten note tucked into Ashe's racket cover at the side of the court. At least twice during the match, Ashe took it out to consult its wisdom.

The man who wrote the note that morning at the Westbury Hotel in London was Donald Dell, Ashe's coach and manager. At match time, he and his wife sat in the players' box.

After they played the first game,+, Dell said, they change ends. Arthur reaches into his racket cover and pulls out this envelope. Nobody else knows what the hell. I do.+

Spectators puzzled at the sight of Ashe reading at courtside.

## A Casual Dinner Conversation at the Playboy Club Leads to Epic Victory

And the commentator says ~~is~~ he in a trance? Is he meditating? What ~~is~~ he doing? ~~q~~+Dell said. And he puts it away. Then about a set later, he does the same thing again.+

Video of the match shows Ashe sitting with his eyes closed at least twice during the changeovers, focusing as prescribed by Dell, Charlie Pasarell, his college roommate at UCLA, and Marty Riessen, a seasoned sidekick from the ATP tour.

The four men had held an impromptu strategy discussion at dinner one or two nights earlier at the Playboy Club in London.

We talked about it, how to play him, how to come in, what to do, +Dell told *World Tennis Gazette* in August. But it was a very light conversation. In the sense that it was a casual discussion.+

The next morning, Dell said, he scrawled out a specific four-point plan based on the dinner table discussion. As Dell recalled, he wrote: Based on the discussion last night, there are about four things that you really oughta think about doing+The four points were addressed to Ashe as lieutenant.+

called him lieutenant . if I wanted to get his attention, +Dell said, referring to Ashe's stint in the U.S. Army after his graduation from UCLA.

In essence, the plan was to hammer Connors's backhand with wide serves, keep the ball low and soft on Connors's forehand, come to net with down-the-line approaches, and focus, focus, focus. Get in the zone, stay in the zone.+

The result stunned Lorge and millions of spectators who watched the final at Wimbledon and from around the world.

Although he had claimed the United States and Australian Open titles in 1968 and 1970, his stature as a leader grew but his playing skill and desire were openly dismissed .

We didn't think he had a chance and hoped he wouldn't be humiliated, +said Bud Collins, the *Boston Globe* sports-writer, historian, and analyst for The Tennis Channel. When Ashe won the first set, we said, well, at least he won't be disgraced.†

Ashe's principal problem in tennis has been consistency, +wrote John McPhee in *Levels of the Game*, his 1969 masterpiece. He has brilliance to squander, but steadiness has not been characteristic of him.+

Inside, it developed, Ashe was a showman hoping to have some fun as a craftsman and risk taker.

Because I became bored fairly easily, +said Ashe in *Days of Grace*, I would try the difficult shot, or sometimes even the impossible shot, just for the hell of it.

I admit I was capable of following flights of exhilarating tennis with bonehead misses. From time to time, my mind certainly wandered on the court. On the whole, however, I was entertaining, + he said. I liked that.+

Writing in *The Washington Post*, on the day after Ashe's triumph over Connors, Correspondent Lorge analyzed the elements that led to the victory and re-

vealed a poorly kept secret about Ashe: Usually a slasher who attacks every shot in a hit-or-miss assault, Ashe today played a controlled, temperate game.+

This cut against the grain of Ashe's attitude.

I liked being reckless, +he said in his 1993 autobiography, as long as I was reckless only on the tennis court, and as long as I won. Fans deserve to see a player with flair, someone for whom tennis is an art as well as a craft.+

At Wimbledon, Lorge wrote, Ashe changed his approach 180 degrees: He went on the court better prepared physically and mentally than he has been before, played an intelligent match that differed greatly from his

usual style, and did not unravel when Connors came from off the ropes to win the third set and lead 3-0 in the fourth.+

By that stage of the match, wrote Fred Tupper vividly in *The New York Times*: Connors had climbed out of the coffin, but could he stay

Lieutenant:

1. Serve wide to his backhand whenever you can.
2. Keep the ball low and soft on his forehand side.
3. Come to net when you get the chance; hit down his backhand side.
4. Stay focused, get in the zone, stay in the zone.

— Donald

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Richard Osborn  
Editor: John Martin

## 'Connors Had Climbed Out of the Coffin, But Could He Stay Alive?'

alive?+

The answer was not for much longer. Ashe worked his way back into the set by refusing to choke and never wavering: %Deliberate and careful,+Tupper wrote, %Ashe stuck to the battle plan.+

With deft, graceful strokes of his typewriter, Tupper described the two final games:

%A backhand wafted high to the corner was good as Connors let it drop, thinking it out. A backhand pass slid down the sideline. Now came a gossamer touch on the chip, putting Ashe at 15-40. Jimmy backhanded a volley wide and there was Ashe serving for the match, the center court enthralled.

%A serve for 15, a desperate dash by Connors for a rocket, down the side, and finally a big, jumping serve that Jimmy could push up only feebly near the net. Arthur smashed it away.

%At last he had won his Wimbledon title.+

In the players box, Dell was watching Ashe hit the final overhead %and then he turned to my wife and I and he went like that (making a fist the in air). And a lot of people thought it was the black power salute; he was waving to us.+

Ashe was the first (and so far only) African-American male to win the All England Club's championship - but how he won it and the burst of adulation it inspired are often forgotten in the fog of history, or, perhaps, the lingering pain of defeat.

When the victor returned to the United States, the response from tennis fans and non-fans alike amounted to an unusual outpouring of national acclaim.

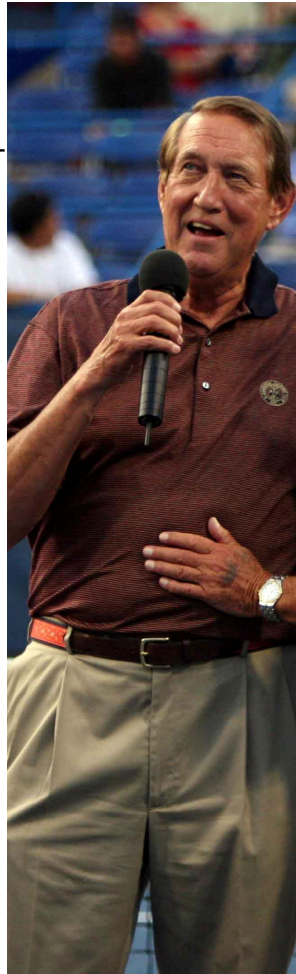
Ashe was toasted at a Congressional reception and greeted at the White House by President Gerald Ford. The victory became the subject of editorials and commentary.

%He is a thinking man,+wrote Joseph Kraft, the syndicated political columnist, calling Ashe's thoughtfulness %a quality rarely celebrated in this popular democracy.+The outpouring of honors, he added, said %something not so bad about the national mood these days.+

Thirty-five years later, memories of the match revived when another seemingly overmatched player faced almost certain defeat on Centre Court.

After this summer's Wimbledon final, when Rafael Nadal mowed down Tomas Berdych, *The Daily Telegraph's* Mark Reason wrote %hat Berdych was trying to play Nadal with short, slow balls. It worked for Arthur Ashe in the epic 1975 final against Jimmy Connors, but Berdych is not such a craftsman.+

Discussing the match four months before his death in 1993, Ashe agreed that it took a craftsman's skill. In an interview with PBS Journalist Charlie Rose, Ashe readily acknowledged the difficulty he faced even when he was



John Martin

Donald Dell

handed the blueprint by Dell.

**Rose:** Here's the plan, Arthur, can you execute it?q

**Ashe:** Right. Right. Can you execute it? Yes, and it called -- as you recall -- a radical change of strategy for me on a grass court.

**Rose:** It was a game you hadn't played before.

**Ashe:** I had never tried it on a grass court.

**Rose:** What was the strategy?

**Ashe:** It was to take the speed off the ball. To give him a lot of junk. as we called it. Because Connors is a very good counter-puncher. The harder you hit it, the better he likes it.

**Rose:** Right.

**Ashe:** Ah, keep the ball down the middle, so he can't open up the court with wide angles. And get my first serve in, and pull him to the net and lob over his two-handed backhand side. And it, worked.+

Decades later, the victory still earns praise as a singular mental achievement. This fall, a religious lecturer in Chicago described the virtues of Ashe's %change of consciousness.+Lois Carlson, a Christian Science teacher and lecturer, challenged her listeners to change their own consciousness as a way of seeking spiritual benefits denied them via more conventional thinking.

%He was able to relax and execute the most unexpected shots,+Carlson said in a daily audio message she delivered to church members around the world. She cited Ashe's ability to %defuse the brute strength of his opponent, and cause a mental shift in the game.+

As one of the sport's more thoughtful competitors, Ashe would almost certainly be pleased to find his example providing spiritual inspiration on and off the tennis court.

And what of the piece of paper that carried the inspiration for his victory? The envelope is not to be found.

%I'm not surprised,+said Christine McKay, archivist for the Ashe Collection at the Schamberg Center for Black History Research in Harlem. The Collection includes legal documents and notes from Donald Dell but there is no sign of the envelope. A search turned up %very few original papers,+she said.

%After all,+McKay explained, %he was a young man traveling the world alone.+

And in that one summer's journey, Arthur Ashe stunned his critics, skillfully suppressed his impulse to swing for impossible shots, and discovered that he had he had altered the way he saw himself and the way his public saw him in the twilight of his career.