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'The Outsider'

38 Years After Jimmy Connors's
Stunning Defeat, He Casts Doubt
on Arthur Ashe's Wimbledon Feat

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Donald Dell: "I never heard that."

By JOHN MARTIN

On the third day of the 2010 U.S. Open, Jimmy Connors walked briskly down a dimly lit corridor in the basement of Arthur Ashe Stadium.

Carrying a dark brown sport coat over his left arm, he spotted a reporter approaching.

"Jimmy," the reporter said, "can I ask you a question about your famed 1975 Wimbledon final with Arthur Ashe?"

"Famed for who?" he said. "Not famed for me!"

Turning a corner, Connors picked up speed, heading for a bank of elevators that ascend to the stadium's broadcast booths.

"It was so long ago," he said, turning his head slightly to be heard over his shoulder, "I can't even remember it!"

In July, 1975, Ashe defeated Connors in the Wimbledon men's singles final, 6-1, 6-1, 5-7, 6-4, astonishing both the tennis world and the oddsmakers.

The victory was celebrated as a triumph of skill by the first African-American male to win the All England Club title, a triumph of craft and composure over bombast and bluster.

But now, in a memoir, Connors reports that he had hidden a knee injury. The implication, never stated explicitly by Connors, is that his hyper-extended knee and "a couple" of hairline fractures of his shin contributed to Connors's defeat.

To be sure, Connors praised Ashe's strategy: "Arthur's game was flawless that day," Connors wrote, "he had figured out the way to play me. By reducing the speed and length of his shots, he constantly brought me into the net before passing or lobbing me."

Connors's injury, he wrote, was suffered in the first round and kept secret to avoid "giving anyone an edge."

Then, 24 hours before the final, he wrote, his physiotherapist "warned me once again to take it easy; he was afraid the fractures were getting worse."

"I never heard that," said Donald Dell, Ashe's coach and manager, in a telephone interview Sunday. Dell, who later managed Connors's career, said he watched the match from a courtside seat without seeing any sign that Connors was playing with an injury. Nor, Dell said, did he

Ashe's victory came less than a week before his 32nd birthday. At 22, Connors was the defending All England champion.

"Shocker at Wimbledon," read the *Sports Illustrated* cover. "Ashe Chops Up Connors."

In postmortems, the victory was hailed as the result of a strategy devised by Ashe and a small band of friends who met for dinner at the Playboy Club in London two nights before the final.

In a 2012 interview, Dell, Ashe's friend and business manager, said the plan was to hammer Connors's backhand with wide serves, keep the ball low, soft, and short on Connors's forehand, come to net with down-the-line approaches, and "focus, focus, focus."

On the morning of the final, Dell said, he wrote a note to Ashe on a hotel envelope containing a list of the "four or five things you should be doing."

In a 1993 interview with Charlie Rose of PBS, four months before his death, Ashe described the approach as "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."

Writing about the final that day, Fred Tupper of *The New York Times*

raised the question of whether Connors might recover after losing the first two sets. Connors won the third set and took a 3-0 lead in the fourth.

By that stage of the match, wrote Tupper, "Connors had climbed out of the coffin, but could he stay alive?"

The answer was not for long. Ashe won six of the seven final games.

In *The Outsider*, Connors wrote of the match's final set: "I'm starting to feel like I have the momentum, but that doesn't last long." His shots lack pace, he said. "The recovery I think I've engineered turns out to be a figment of my imagination."

Nearly 40 years after the match and 20 years after Ashe's death, Connors has remembered the match in a different light.

