

# Champions

*Celebrating its 90th anniversary, the ATA Nationals stands as a tribute to pride and perseverance. >>> by Chris Nicholson*

AS ANY SOCIALLY CONSCIOUS TENNIS PLAYER KNOWS, there was a time, not long enough ago, when “all whites” referred to more than just court attire. In tournament tennis, you could mix your serves, but not your races.

In 1917, more than 30 years before an African-American would be permitted to play in the U.S. Championships, the newly-founded American Tennis Association (ATA) sponsored a tournament to give black players an opportunity to compete for a national title.

Ninety years later, the game is integrated. But the ATA lives on as the oldest African-American sports organization in the U.S., and it is set to commemorate the 90th anniversary of its national tournament with a blowout party in New York City.

“It’s a big celebration,” says Sallie Elam, tournament director and executive secretary of the ATA. “One, because the ATA Nationals has not been in New York City since the early 1940s. And two, because it’s the 90th anniversary of our national tournament. People have been talking about this for the last three years.”

More than 1,000 entrants ages 10 to 80 are expected to play in the event, scheduled for July 22 to 28. Matches will be held at several locations in Queens, including Highland Park, Flushing Meadows Corona Park, and the USTA Billie Jean King National Tennis Center.

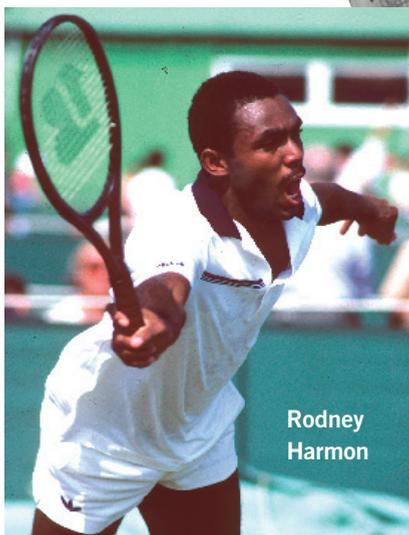
And as it has been for nine decades, the tournament is open to players of all races.

“Our forefathers did not want to continue the segregation that had been thrown on them for so many years,” says ATA President Willis Thomas Jr., who won five consecutive ATA junior doubles titles with Arthur Ashe from 1954 to ’58. “People at that time were calling us the ‘Negro Tennis Association,’ but our forefathers said they did not want it to be an organization only for black players. The ATA always allowed anyone to play, and we’ve had many white champions. We’re all-inclusive.”

Still, without the ATA and the courageous work of its leadership (namely, Robert Walter Johnson, Hubert Eaton and Bertram Baker) before the civil rights movement even began, tennis’ color barrier likely would have taken much longer to break.

“Every black who wanted to play competitive tennis had to do it through the ATA—there was no other venue for them to play,” Thomas says. “For Althea Gibson, especially, without the ATA she wouldn’t have even been ready for 1954, when she went to Wimbledon and she played the U.S. Championships. She was a black champ before she was a U.S. champ. We provided the forum for her to develop those skills.”

After Gibson proved that a black woman could equal and best any other player on court, the ATA then helped prepare Ashe to do the same on the men’s circuit 10 years later. Combined, Gibson and



Rodney Harmon

Althea Gibson

# of Equality

## ATA Anniversary Events

For the 90th anniversary of the ATA Nationals, the association is hosting a variety of events in New York City, including those below. For more information about the ATA and the tournament, including hotel reservations, visit [www.atanational.com](http://www.atanational.com).

- **CHARITY CELEBRITY PRO-AM**, a team-format event on Sunday, July 22, allows entrants to play alongside the likes of former pros Lori McNeil, Rodney Harmon and MaliVai Washington, former New York City Mayor David Dinkins, and former New Jersey State Senator Sharpe James.
- **WELCOMING RECEPTION**, hosted by Queens Borough President Helen Marshall at the USTA Billie Jean King National Tennis Center museum.
- **LIFE MEMBER'S RECEPTION**, at the Mutual of America building in Manhattan.
- **FAMILY NIGHT AT SHEA STADIUM**, for a Mets game vs. the Pittsburgh Pirates.
- **PIZZA AND POOL PARTY FOR THE JUNIORS**, July 25 at the Crowne Plaza-LaGuardia Airport.
- **ANNUAL GALA AT THE CROWNE PLAZA HOTEL**, on July 26, where Leslie Allen will be presented with a lifetime achievement award.
- **EVENING YACHT RIDE AND DINNER DANCE**, in New York harbor on July 27.

Arthur  
Ashe

Zina  
Garrison

Ashe won 16 career Grand Slam titles.

In later decades, the association continued to help minority tennis players get a foot on court—Lori McNeil, Rodney Harmon, Katrina Adams, MaliVai Washington, Leslie Allen and more were all groomed by ATA coaches. So was Zina Garrison, one of Thomas' students who went on to win 30 WTA Tour titles, and now serves as captain of the U.S. Fed Cup team.

"The ATA was my first national tournament, at 11 years old," Garrison says. "There was a whole group of kids—we took a bus out to San Diego from Houston—and it was the first time that I saw a lot of African-Americans playing the game that I had fallen in love with, all in one spot. The national tournament allows kids to have a sense of pride. You meet people from around the country that, for me, became friends for a lifetime."

These days, the ATA no longer needs to lobby for integration.

But, Thomas explains, that doesn't mean their mission is complete.

"The ATA has managed to continue all of these years because there are people who feel there needs to be an organization that's dedicated to looking out for the interest of black Americans," Thomas says. "We see ourselves as *partnering* with the USTA, because we both want to grow the game. But we focus on growing the game in places that haven't been touched yet."

That growth, Thomas says, starts with children, which is why he sees the ATA's junior events as the most important part of the Nationals. His hope is that one day soon the ATA will find a sponsor for its junior

tournament so that kids from all over the country can participate regardless of their financial situation.

In the meantime, Thomas is thrilled to see that the event is still strong in its old age, and that it at once foretells a bright future and recalls a noble past.

"It's awesome to see our history," Garrison says. "I think it's great that Willis is president—he grew up with Arthur Ashe, he learned from Dr. Johnson. There's so much history there, and we shouldn't lose our history. The fact that the Nationals is 90 years old, that's amazing."

That longevity has grown from seeds that were sown in a dignified purpose, and its steadfast charge has bred a camaraderie and a loyalty that has endured for almost a century.

"I've been a member of this organization since I was 10, and I've played every year," says Elam, who, now in her 60s, has won 27 national ATA women's doubles titles, all with her cousin. "We look forward to it. You can't grow old in this sport." 