

Arthur Ashe, with Neil Amdur. *Off the Court*. (New York: New American Library, 1981) 230 pp., \$3.50 paper.

Arthur Ashe, tennis professional who in 304 tournaments won fifty-one and reached the finals in forty-two others, had a heart attack at thirty-six and then quadruple by-pass surgery. A sensitive, well-read and intelligent black athlete, Ashe is instinctively conservative and projects a concerned curiosity in his quest for understanding not only his own problems as man and athlete but also today's serious racial and political issues. This book, his third, is clearly written (with Neil Amdur, *New York Times* sportswriter) and reflects Ashe's respect for, and admiration of the English language: "I like the English language and its nuances . . . I have no interest in learning how to be a master of Black English. I understand it because I've heard it all my life . . . I learned to speak the English language very well." This attitude toward language seems to reflect Ashe's general unresolved view of how to maintain his blackness and how to conform to WASP attitudes, especially when he is successful artistically (as an athlete) and materialistically.

His heart attack is a depressing subject to us physical-fitness buffs, for Ashe was a slender, splendidly conditioned young athlete who could play a five-set, three-hour-plus singles match. He believes that family history and stress were the two important factors in his myocardial infarction. Cardiovascular disease and hypertension dogged both sides of his family; his mother died of these ailments when she was twenty-seven. Her death was a deeply traumatic blow to her son, and possibly Ashe's public, tightly controlled personality is based on his not allowing himself to show the deep emotions he felt then. As he says: "A lot of people think of me as detached, aloof, cold. I am detached somewhat, and maybe a little aloof, but I'm not cold. I have a lot of empathy for life in general, for the underdog, for people in embarrassing situations. I probably withdrew in certain ways to defend myself against the negative manifestations of having lost a mother at age six. Withdrawal helps defend you; you can build a little wall around yourself so that you let only very few things in." Another factor was his being a black man spearheading a break into burgeoning big-time, big-money professional tennis. In his earliest years of playing tournaments as a junior, he had to be scrupulously controlled and polite. It was years before he understood, he says, "the emotional toll of repressing anger and natural frustrations."

Ashe's coolly intellectual view of marriage was part of both the emotional residue of his mother's death and his pragmatic view of life. His early dating of Patricia Battles when he was fifteen led to a formal engagement to her at age twenty-three. However, he called off the planned wedding: "I felt ashamed of the breakup and wondered how a business decision could make me fall out of love. For a long time, I thought I was rather cold-blooded about it, but the trips abroad had opened up new worlds and I wanted to see and experience those without

the burden of a wife and possibly children." He later says that marriage was a frightening prospect because of his fear of divorce; when he reached thirty he was ready to share his life with someone, for he felt he would not resent the "restraints on his time. This may seem to be a cold-blooded approach to marriage, but I wanted to take a logical and rational view of the institution and to make sure it would work for me."

Of course Ashe has obvious interest in racism in sports. Like Harry Edwards, Ashe rejects the concept that there are significant anatomical and cultural differences among the races making one group physically superior to another in certain sports. "There is an assumption that if blacks are found to be physically superior, they must be intellectually inferior. I ran into that thinking at Stellenbosch University in South Africa. Such inquiries can be dangerous: the professor and his students were using them to justify apartheid." A second point is that racism is commercially valuable in sports. As he says: "Race has a hell of a lot to do with the commercial success of sports. A ton. In boxing, Gerry Cooney is worth more because he's white than if he were nonwhite . . . Gerry Cooney sticks out." Even though sports is supposed to be the racial equalizer, it's clear that in any hand-to-hand event or team sport, skin color is a factor with large commercial value.

As a professor teaching "Sports in American Life," I have read several scholars—Mumford, Huizinga, Veblen, Toynbee—who have pointed out the relationship of capitalism, Christianity, and sports. It shows Ashe's acumen for him to have realized that "our economic philosophy of capitalism and our Christian ethics are complete polar opposites." This has led the United States into serious social hypocrisies in relation to amateur vs. professional sports, and even to a schizoid view of how to do unto-others when you're using your killer-instinct (Thorstein Veblen calls it characteristically your "predatory emulative propensity") to cream an opponent.

This is a book worth reading not merely for its depiction of a black athlete's later career and medical tragedy but for its delineation of a complex and intelligent man, who in showing us the "truth" of his life, presents us with some fascinating, unconscious self-revelation.

— Stewart Rodnon
Rider College