Arthur Ashe was a graceful man in both his professional and personal life.

Arthur Ashe (1943–1993)

Riddick Bowe knocked out Michael Dokes at Madison Square Garden last night (February 6, 1993). Years from now, what I'll remember most about the evening is a moment of shared grief. Shortly before the bout began, it was announced that Arthur Ashe had died.

There was a moan of collective sorrow from the crowd. A good man has been taken from us long before what should have been his time.

Ashe rose to prominence as the first black superstar in men's tennis. He's the only black man to win the men's singles title at the U.S. Open (1965), Australian Open (1970), or Wimbledon (1975). He underwent a quadruple bypass surgery after suffering a heart attack in 1979 and retired from competitive tennis a year later.

Arthur lived a full life after he left the playing field. He was a devoted husband and father. On the professional side of the ledger, he authored an autobiography and *A Hard Road To Glory* (a three-volume history of the African American athlete); served as president of Artists and Athletes Against Apartheid and captain of the U.S. Davis Cup team; worked as a sports commentator for ABC and HBO; and was deeply involved in a number of charitable causes. Last year, he founded the Arthur Ashe Institute for Urban Health. In December, *Sports Illustrated* designated him as its Sportsman of the Year.

I met Arthur on three occasions. The first was when I interviewed him at his apartment in Manhattan in 1989 for a book that I was writing; *Muhammad Ali: His Life and Times*.

Ashe was critical of certain aspects of Ali's life.

"I never went along with the pronouncements of Elijah Muhammad [Ali's spiritual leader when he joined the Nation of Islam]," Arthur told me. "It was a racist ideology, a sort of American apartheid, and I didn't like it. But Ali combined his athletic talent with social action during the

1960s, when both he and the black social revolution reached their peak. And the result was that he became an icon for literally millions of black Americans."

"I personally can remember feeling all tingly when Ali refused to step forward at that induction center in Houston in 1967," Ashe added. "It wasn't just that he'd lose his title. I thought the man was going to jail. I really believe that, if Ali hadn't done what he did, Harry Edwards wouldn't have gotten a fraction of the support he got in 1968 to boycott the Mexico City Olympics. I know Ali certainly influenced me later in 1967. The Davis Cup draw came up; and lo and behold, the United States was supposed to meet South Africa in the third round. I was thinking to myself, 'Oh, my God. Just three months ago, Muhammad Ali refused to cross the line. And here I am, the only black player in tennis, the main member of the Davis Cup team.' There's no question that Ali's sacrifice was in the forefront of my mind. Fortunately, the president of the United States Tennis Association then was Robert Kelleher, a wonderful man. We talked about it, and he suggested that the most effective way to deal with the situation would be for us to give up the home-court advantage. We had what was known as choice of ground. Kelleher told me, 'Let's do something that has never been done in the history of Davis Cup competition. Let's offer to play South Africa in South Africa and go down there and beat the crap out of them. Let South Africa see a black person win in their own backyard. It never came to that. South Africa lost to West Germany in the second round. But Ali was very much in my thoughts."

Two years later, I sat with Arthur for a second time. I was speaking with a cross section of black leadership in America for a twenty-two-page feature that would appear in *Penthouse* magazine. Arthur was one of eight people I interviewed, along with Jesse Jackson, John Lewis, Charles Rangel, Mary Francis Berry, Roger Wilkins, Sterling Johnson, and Harry Belafonte.

We talked about the role of sports in breaking down racial barriers. Then I asked, "What sort of moral obligation do you think today's African American athletes have?"

"That's the central question," Arthur told me. "I believe they have a moral obligation to assist, and don't just assist blacks. It's a play off the adage, 'From those to whom much has been given, much is expected.' If

you're doing that well, there is definitely a role that you can play to help the situation. If you don't do it, I think that's a serious omission."

"The athletes today," Ashe continued, "very few of them seem to have a moral or historical consciousness about how they got to where they are. The most famous statement that is bandied about now is the one that Vince Coleman made. Major League Baseball was celebrating Jackie Robinson's fortieth anniversary. Vince Coleman was asked, 'What did Jackie Robinson mean to you?' And Vince Coleman's answer was, 'I don't know nothing about no Jackie Robinson.' It was said in a way that meant, 'Don't bother me; that stuff doesn't matter to me; I could care less who Jackie Robinson was.' It was almost like, 'All I care about is doing as well as I can, so I can make as much money as I can.' And I say it has gone too far. It's okay to be an individualist if you're responsible. But some of these athletes, black athletes, don't want to be role models. They are loath to speak up about social issues. It's like pulling teeth to get them to show up at some political function or fundraiser. I'm not saying that it's true of all of them, but it's very difficult. You would not have had to do that with Jackie Robinson or Wilt Chamberlain or Jim Brown. This generation just seems to be out for themselves, although obviously there are some exceptions."

Last summer, I crossed paths with Ashe one last time. I was in New Jersey with Muhammad Ali for a fundraiser to benefit Project Pride.

Arthur had just announced that had AIDS. In 1983, he'd undergone a second heart operation. Five years later, he learned that he was HIV-positive as a consequence of a blood transfusion received during the second surgery. He'd kept his illness private until he learned that *USA Today* was on the verge of publishing an article about his condition.

The dinner began with a reception in Ali's honor. Muhammad was seated in a cushioned chair in a room adjacent to the banquet hall. He has reached a time in his life when it can be difficult for him to interact with crowds. I'd been asked to sit beside him to keep the reception line moving and ensure that things went smoothly.

It was a long line. People waited patiently for their moment with The Greatest . . . A handshake, an autograph, a photo, words of adoration . . . Then the person talking with Muhammad would move on as another moved into place.

At one point, I looked toward the far end of the room to see how many more people were in line. Arthur Ashe was standing near the end of the line, patiently waiting his turn.

No pulling rank . . . No "I'm a famous celebrity" . . .

I stood up and walked over to Arthur.

"You shouldn't be here," I told him. "You should be sitting with Muhammad."

I brought Ashe to the head of the line. Muhammad rose and embraced him.

They sat together for the rest of the reception.

That's the image of Arthur that I'll always carry with me. Arthur Ashe and Muhammad Ali, side-by-side. Two giants of our time.