

Blackout—African-American players scarce at Open

By Huel Washington
Sentinel-Voice

Almost 40 years have passed since Arthur Ashe Jr., the only male African-American tennis player to be ranked number one in this country, won the amateur and the first professional U.S. Open tennis championships in the same year.

Since Ashe defeated Bob Lutz for the 1968 amateur and Tom Okker for the 1968 Open title, there has neither been an African-American male U.S. Open champion, nor has one ever appeared in the final match of the tournament.

On the other hand, the arrival of the Williams sisters, Venus and Serena, on the tennis circuit in the late 1990s gave the distaff side of the race something to brag about as they dominated the Meadowlands court from 1999 to 2002. Twice, the sisters played each other in the championship match. Venus beat little sister in 2001, and Serena prevailed in 2002.

As the U.S. Open began Monday, August 29, there were high expectations for at least one of the Williams to be in the finals on the Arthur Ashe Jr. court.

Probably Venus, because of her phenomenal comeback earlier this year at Wimbledon in the final match against Lindsay Davenport, would become the current number one player in the world rankings.

And this year's draw has both of the Williams on the same side; if they win their matches, they will probably meet in the quarter finals this year.

This time, there are also two males in the position to challenge.

James Blake, a former number one player at Harvard University, who took up tennis in New York City, has made a remarkable recovery from a broken neck he sustained while practicing several years ago. Blake is one of the brothers who African-Americans will be pulling for this week.

The other contender is 16-year-old Donald Young who turned professional at age 14 and moved from the Midwest to Florida so he could play tennis all year round. Young, a left-hander, is the first African-American to win the 16-year-old Orange Bowl and the Easter Bowl tournament at 15 years of age. He won a Junior Grand Slam tournament in Australia this year and is the youngest



SPORTS PACE

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player to be ranked number one in the juniors.

The youngster is coached by his parents, Donald, Sr. and Ilona Young, who both played tennis in college. He has been on the court with tennis legend John McEnroe, who has nothing but praise for him and thinks he will play well in this week's tournament.

Blake, relying on his forehand last week, comes back to New York as the Pilot Pen champion, having defeated Feliciano Lopez last Sunday, 3-6, 7-5, 6-1, in the championship match at New Haven, Conn.

He contracted Zoster's Disease after breaking his neck by falling and hitting the net pole. It affected his sight and hearing and temporarily paralyzed part of his face. His father also died that summer. It was a devastating series of events.

Blake was dropped from the Davis Cup team and after making a remarkable recovery, he began the tour ranked somewhere below 200. He made the finals in the Washington, D.C. tournament a couple of weeks ago and entered the Pilot Pen ranked number 67.

As Blake gets ready for the Meadowlands, he said that being where he went to

college and currently resides makes him feel very relaxed. He said it also helped to have the crowd cheering for him all during the match.

For Blake to win the U.S. Open would take a miracle. He has already had one with the Pilot Pen, his first win in three years. And a few of the ladies from San Diego, along with Mashona Washington, also have slim chances to be in the final.

Ashe established the National Junior Tennis League in 1970 hoping to get his race interested in the sport he adored. At that time, the prizes were trophies and plaques but very little finance for the players. He said African-Americans chose football, basketball and baseball because they could make more money than tennis players.

Well, the winners' purses have changed over the years, so much so that the winner of the U.S. Open — male or female — will get over \$1 million. The Open gives equal purses to the men and the women winners.

Both of the Williams sisters have made over \$10 million in purses; their endorsements of Nike, Reebok, McDonald's and a few others have made them and their parents tremendously rich.

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