1968 US Open 50th Anniversary

A SERIES OF PHOTOGRAPHS BY JOHN G. ZIMMERMAN DOCUMENTING ARTHUR ASHES'S HISTORIC VICTORY AT THE FIRST US OPEN

Arthur Ashe's victory at the US Open in 1968 was an iconic moment of American history. As the first black man to win a Grand Slam tennis tournament, his victory resonated with the seismic social and political changes that were taking placing across the globe that year. The ways in which he operated both on and off court were uniquely captured by the American photographer John G. Zimmerman, who on September 9 and 10, 1968, had the exclusive opportunity to follow Ashe while on assignment for LIFE magazine. However, Zimmerman's photographs-most presented here for the very first time--are not about Ashe's victory, or even tennis. They are fundamentally about the dignity, strength and quiet

courage of a man whose talent led him from the segregated streets of Richmond to the cover of LIFE magazine and eventually to become a much heralded advocate for civil rights the world over. His victory was a sign that society was changing, but what meant most to Ashe at the time is that an American had become the first US Open Men's Champion.

John G. Zimmerman (1927-2002) was one of the 20th century's most wide-ranging and innovative photojournalists. His iconic images appeared in magazines such as *LIFE*, *Time*, *Ebony and Sports Illustrated* for four decades

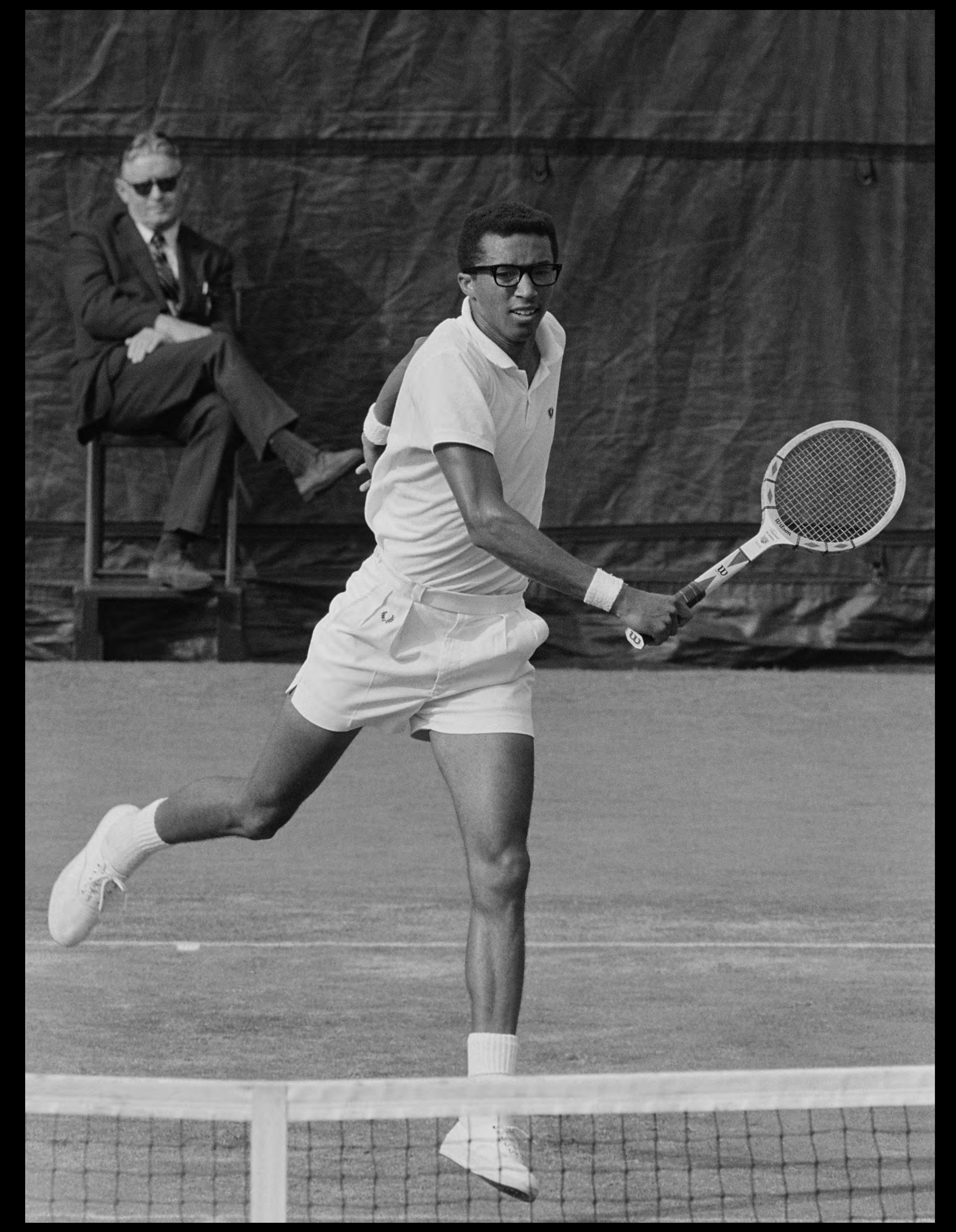


Photographs by John G. Zimmerman

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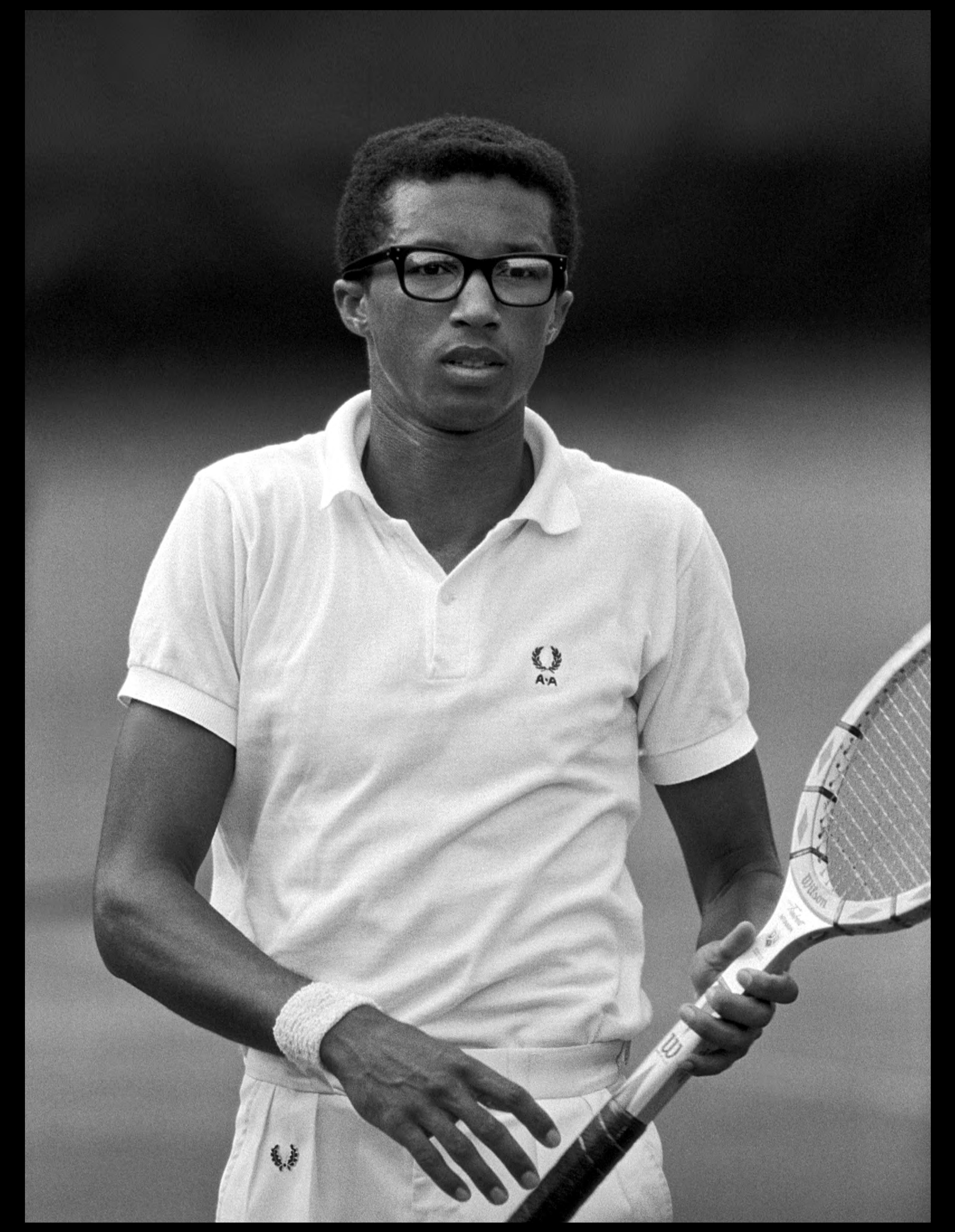


The Open Era, uniting amateur and professional tennis, came to Forest Hills and for the first time offered prize money, totaling \$100,000. Arthur Ashe and Virginia Wade won the singles titles. Ashe was still registered as an amateur and therefore not entitled to the \$14,000 first-prize award, which went to runner-up Tom Okker. As Ashe would recount, he instead received a per diem of \$28.



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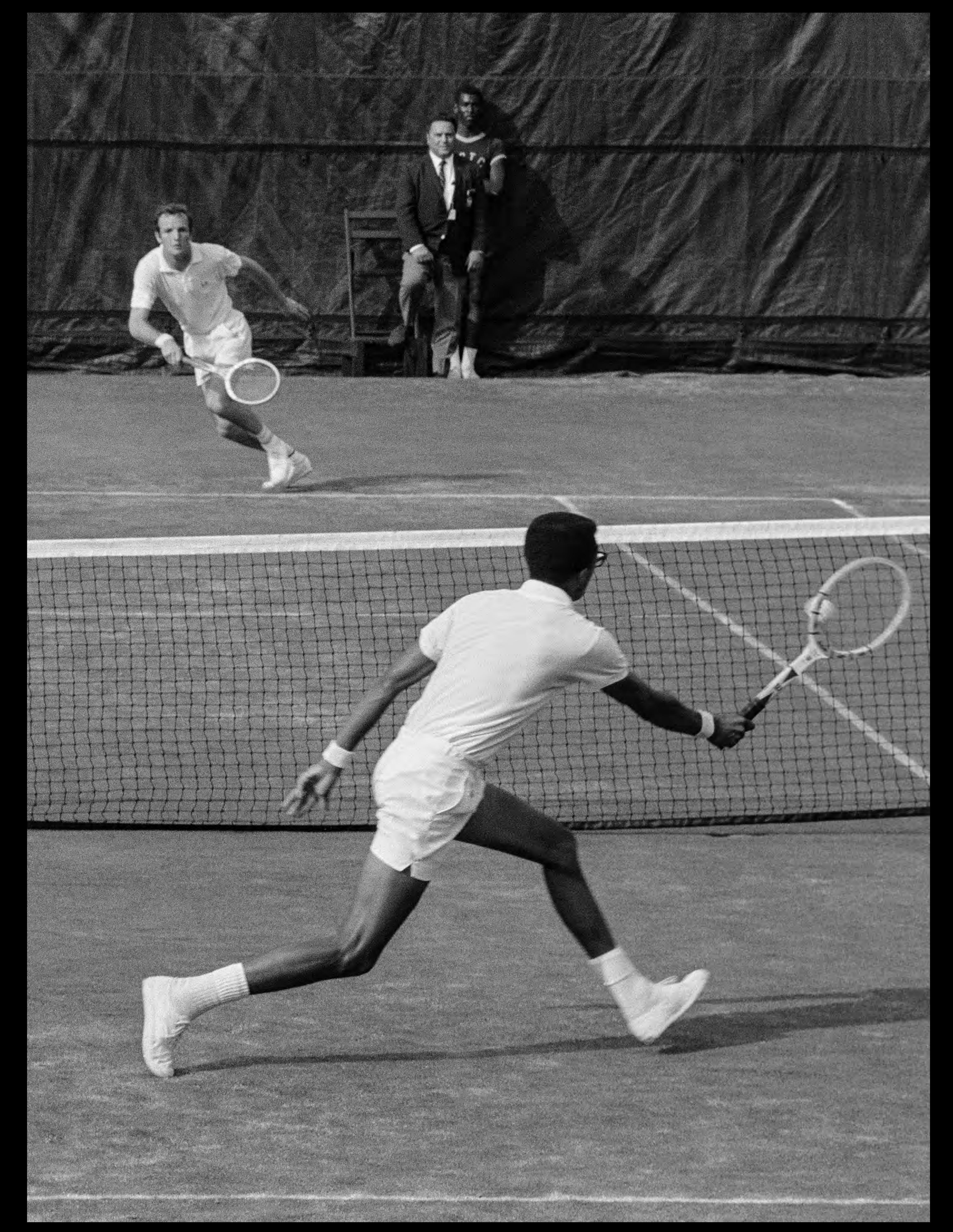
This first US Open took place during the twilight of a summer of racial discord and inner-city rioting, following the April assassination of civil rights leader Martin Luther King, Jr. Yet, the immensely talented Ashe, with characteristic nonchalance for courtside spectacle, was just going about the business of playing tennis while making sporting news and social history.



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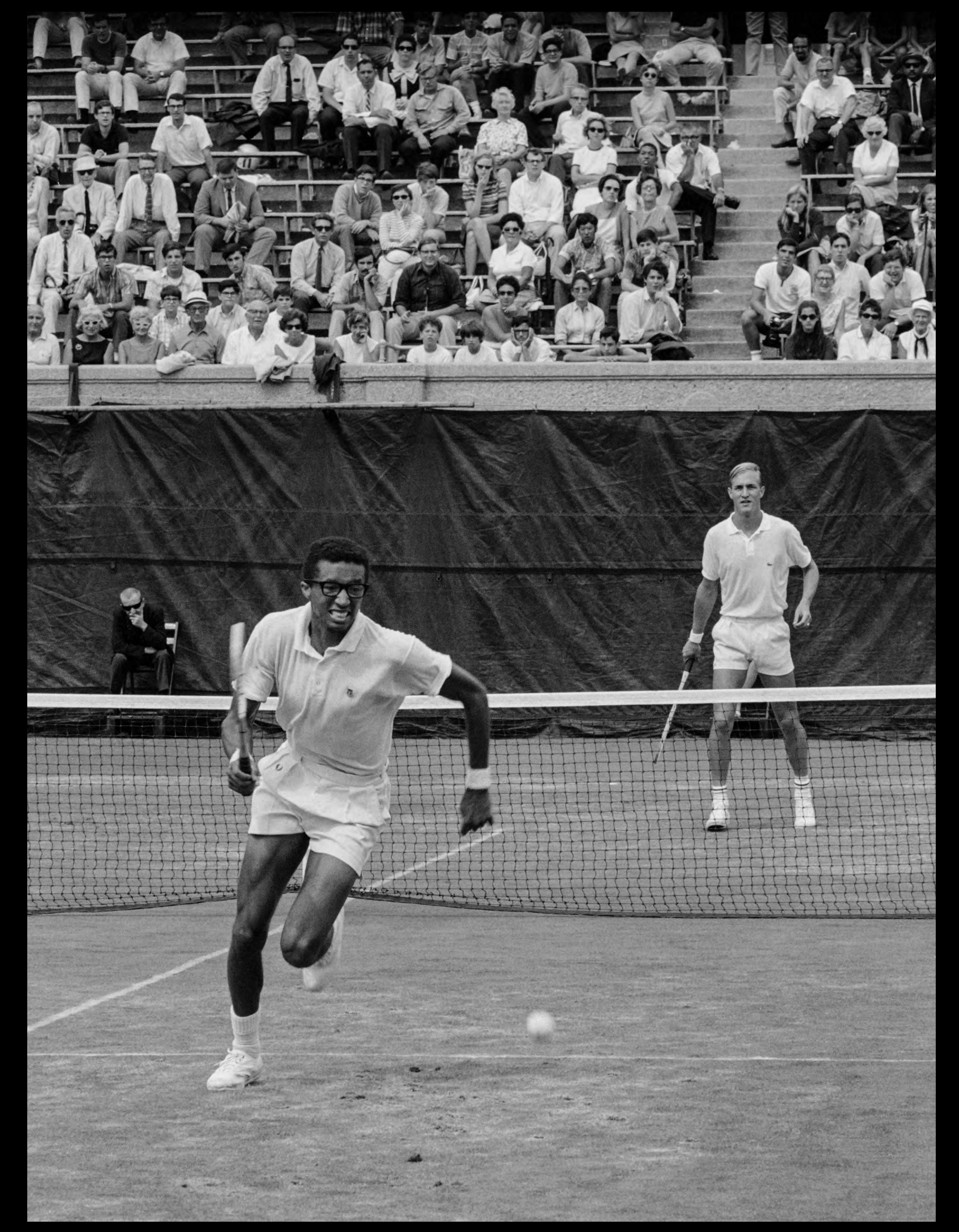
Fifty years ago, white was the color traditionally associated with top-tier international tennis. In those days it was the regulation color for both tennis balls and tennis attire. Below: The cornerstone of Ashe's game, serving and volleying, was magnificent that afternoon. He pounded 26 aces in the final and his volleying was flawless against the fleet-footed Okker, here on a crisply executed, angled crosscourt winner.



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Ashe chases a lob from Stan Smith in the doubles final, in which Smith and Bob Lutz defeated Ashe and Andrés Gimeno. Ashe, Smith and Lutz, as well as Charlie Pasarell, Clark Graebner, Cliff Richey and team captain Donald Dell were the cornerstones of the 1968 Davis Cup squad, who won the cup for only the second time in 13 years, defeating powerful Australia in December.

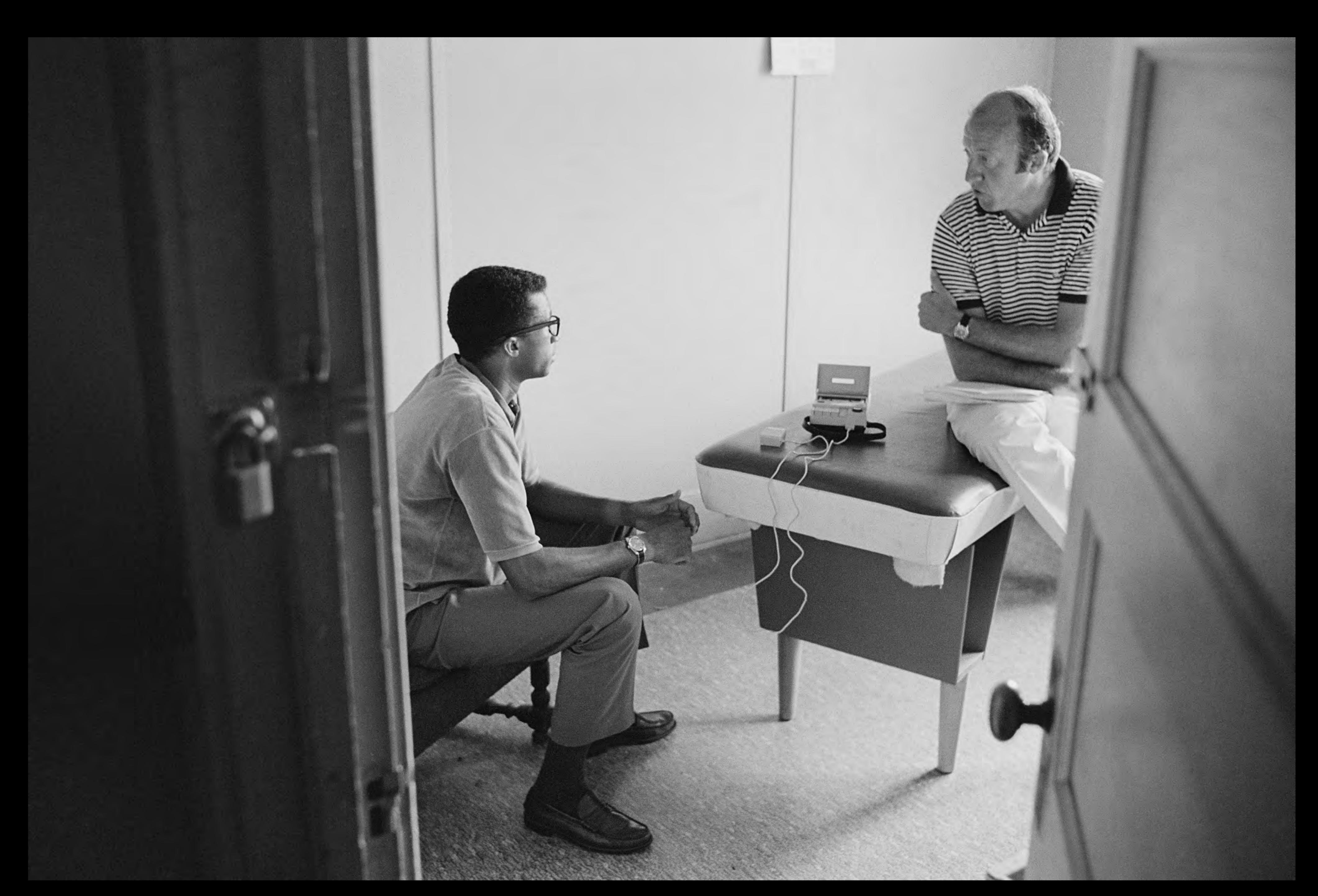


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Ashe's life was an incredible racial negotiation, even drinking from a water fountain. Following him on and off court, photographer John Zimmerman captured all that nuanced richness. Top, I and r: in the locker room of the famed West Side Tennis Club, Forest Hills. Bottom: Ashe interviewed by Bud Collins.

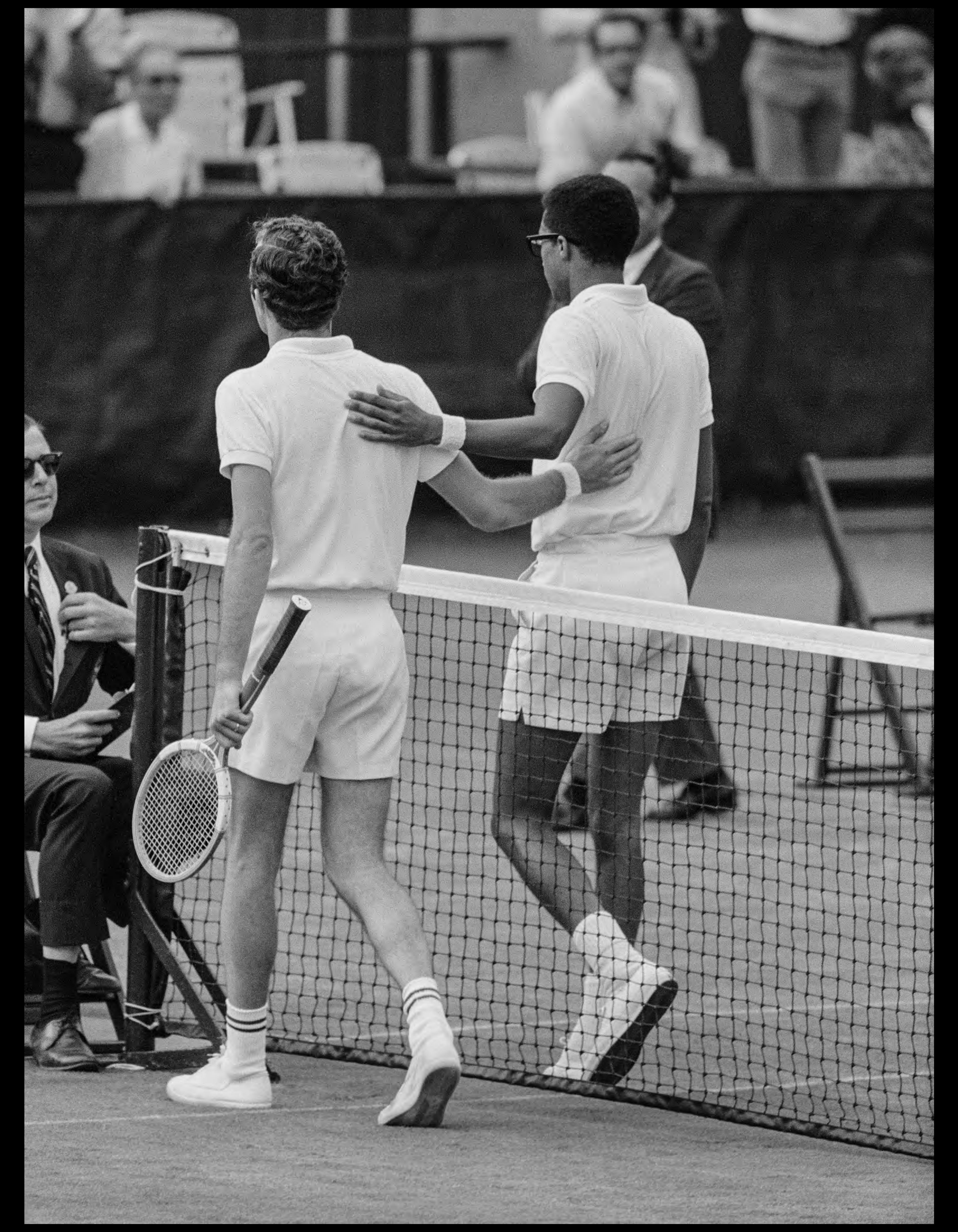




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On sunny September 9th, 1968, Ashe, then 25, became an unlikely US Open champion, beating Tom Okker of the Netherlands, known as "The Flying Dutchman" for his quickness and reckless abandon, 14–12, 5–7, 6–3, 3–6, 6–3. The match was played on a Monday in an uncharacteristically half-empty stadium, having been rained out the previous day. In the women's final, Virginia Wade upset the defending champion Billie Jean King, 6-4, 6-2.



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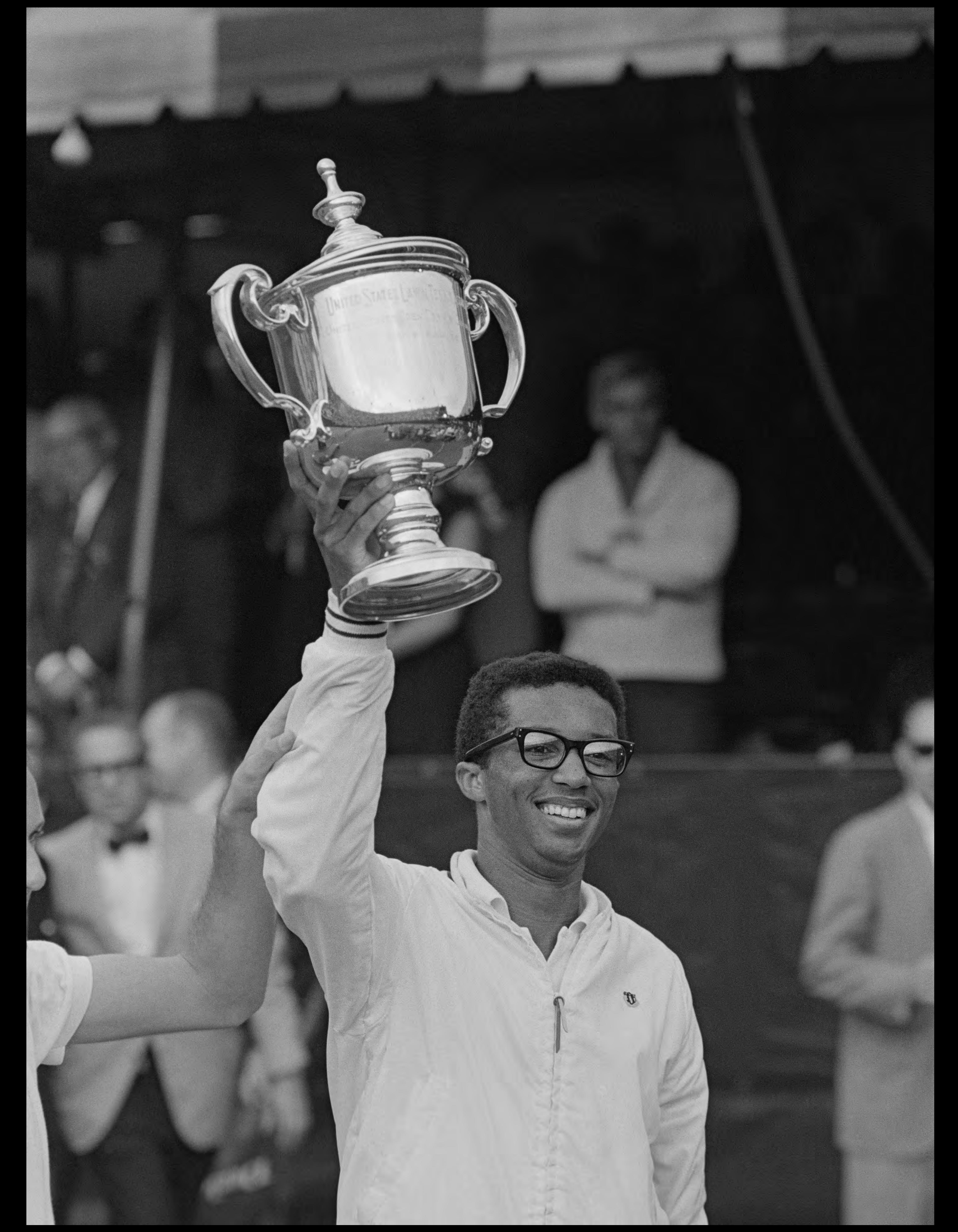
"My father is an emotional man. He cries quite easily over things that touch him, and it's nothing that he's ashamed of. He feels comfortable with it, but I hadn't seen him cry like that in years. I was at a loss for words. When he said, 'Well done, son,' I knew how much that moment must have meant to him. I'm sure he thought about all the sacrifice, the money he spent, or tried to spend, which he really couldn't afford, in order to give one of his children the chance to do what I did. That day for me was a vindication for a lot of people, for all the people who helped me along the way, (including) my coach Doctor Johnson who was also Althea Gibson's coach; he was sitting up in the stands and he was just happy to see someone that he had brought along from day one win the US Open. So, vindication is what I think about."



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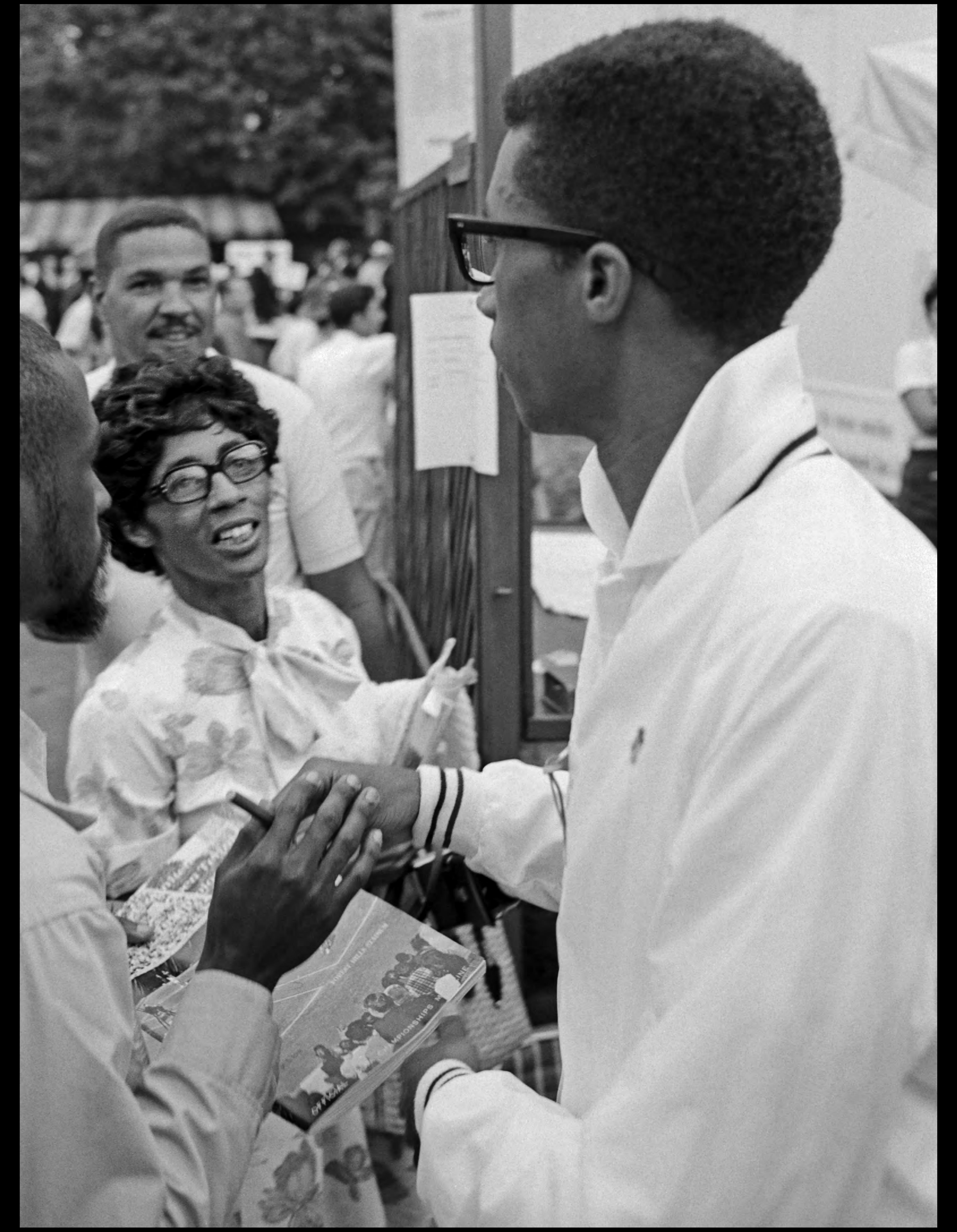


"In 1968, when I was honored with my picture on the cover of *LIFE* magazine, the accompanying line read, 'The Icy Elegance of Arthur Ashe.' I don't like being called cold, and I don't agree with it as a fair description of me." However, elsewhere Ashe disclosed his coolness was "an adopted shield," which could be traced back to his upbringing in the segregated South.



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Ashe signs autographs and is greeted by his aunt, Marie Cunningham, after the match. "Even though it was a monumental achievement for me, I didn't realize the true significance of it until it was over and several days had passed. There was so much happening in 1968, it was difficult to savor any one particular event. This US Open victory was sandwiched among Doctor King's assassination, Bobby Kennedy's assassination, the coming black boycott of the Mexico City Olympics, President Johnson saying he wouldn't run for president, riots in the summer in Newark, LA--you didn't get five minutes to breathe."



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Ashe faces news reporters after the match. He made some outspoken, yet nuanced, statements about the black power struggle he would inevitably become involved in. "Once, I never looked back. Now I'm forced to look back. If you plan for the future you have to study the past. Everybody is conscious of black power, white power, purple power, whatever you say. I am black, so I'm sorta caught up in black power, I guess."



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Top: Ashe interviewed the day after his win on the clubhouse porch at the West Side Tennis Club and (below) signing autographs for young fans after the victory. His win would provide a worldwide media platform to speak out on civil rights issues, from which he did not shy away. Ashe: "The question is, 'Which road do I take?' Well, I'm definitely not conservative, and definitely not moderate in these matters. I guess I'm a militant, but there are varying degrees of militancy--all the way from outright killing to brinkmanship. I guess I'm somewhere in between."





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His tennis career became a balance of sport and activism. "You certainly look back and wonder, 'What might I have done differently?' or, 'What was it in the total scheme of things I would like to do over and decide differently?' Donald Dell and some others used to try to get me to be more single focused about tennis and put some of the other things-off court social issues or civil rights matters-put them on a shelf or downplay their role in my time schedule and I felt very guilty about doing that." Below: Never one to waste a minute, Ashe catches up on reading the paper, unrecognized on the NYC subway, the day after his historic win.



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"Being thrust on center stage gave me a great opportunity to reach people. The week after I won the Open, I appeared on Face the Nation, the first athlete ever invited on the show. I talked about the role of the black athlete in professional sports and how it relates to the momentum that was building as a result of civil rights legislation." He would tell his brother Johnnie, "You will see a change in me. People will listen to me now. I have a platform and I intend to use it." Below: Ashe is recognized and congratulated while walking the streets of Manhattan.





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As a *LIFE* photographer, John Zimmerman had an unrivaled access to Ashe that is unimaginable today. This resulted in hundreds of never-before-seen pictures. Apart from a handful of images, the photo essay remained unpublished. The 50th anniversary of Ashe's victory provides the ideal occasion to finally release these profound materials. A more comprehensive collection of the portfolio is available in a new book, *Crossing the Line: Arthur Ashe at the 1968 US Open*. Bottom: Stan Smith (I) Ashe, and Clark Graebner travel with other members of the Davis Cup team, and (top) Smith and Ashe at the Las Vegas airport.



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Ashe was sometimes challenged in ways far greater than the competition he faced across the net. In 1969, he was denied a visa to play in the South African Open because of that country's apartheid policy. Ashe subsequently called for the expulsion of South Africa from the professional tennis circuit, which won many supporters and raised worldwide awareness about ending apartheid. Below: Ashe (bottom) in a rare moment of solitude, at the roulette table in the Desert Inn Casino Hotel. Top: Backstage at Caesars Palace with headline performer Harry Belafonte. The two would team up in 1983 to found *Artists and Athletes Against Apartheid*.





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