

# 20 Insights

Into Breaking Barriers of Race and  
Culture in the Sport of Tennis



Bernard A. Chavis, Author  
“The Games of Tennis”  
An African American Journey

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## **What did you hope to accomplish by writing your book?**

**Ans.** To expose racial and cultural barriers in the sport of tennis, by relating my experiences in various positions in the sport, on the local, regional and national levels of the game. And to heighten the awareness of my readers that just like in society there is still a ways to go for African Americans to gain equal access to all areas of the sport, from the grass courts to the board room.

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## **Where did the idea for the book come from?**

**Ans.** For most of my life I have experienced insensitivities and incidents of racism toward African Americans. A lot of these incidents were born out of ignorance and a lack of understanding. These happenings occur on both professional and social levels. Instead of being bitter, I decided to document the incidents and attempt to figure out why they happened.

I decided to become an educator to every one that I came in contact with. My plan was to have honest discussions to breakdown the barriers. Writing the book was both cathartic and enlightening. I became an agent for change. I see positive sign of growth in relations and relationships. Americans are a resilient and resourceful people and given the understanding of past injustices and biased thinking are open to change.

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## **How long did it take to write the book?**

**Ans.** I never thought of my self as a writer, but the lack of a level playing field in the sport of tennis caused me the think that somebody should write about the struggle to break racial and cultural barriers in the sport. The thought kept coming up from time to time as I would encounter different obstacles. So after thinking about it for 5 years, I decided why not me? The actual writing of the book took 2 1/2 years.

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## **Why did you choose the subjects of Race and Barriers?**

**Ans.** I grew up in Washington, DC at a time when the city was completely segregated. As a child I was very confused as to where I could or couldn't go. Having been subjected to many challenges of race and equal access it seemed a natural subject to explore.

My hope is to bring about awareness that America is a melting pot of all kinds of ethnic groups and it is important that we all need to interact on a positive basis with everyone. We live in a diverse society, and each ethnic group brings something to the table. If we continue to recognize this fact and meld our talents and cultures, together we can make this a much better world.

## **5** How will this book help change people's attitude about Race?

**Ans.** It is my hope that many of the examples of biased thinking and acts of disrespect and insensitivities revealed in the book will cause readers to rethink their attitudes on this important subject. The subject matter crosses all races, cultures and ethnicities. I trust that my experiences will be thought provoking and begin to give pause on how we act and react to various situations and people we encounter on a daily basis. The bottom line is that everyone wants to be treated with dignity and respect.

## **6** Why do you think people will be interested in reading your book?

**Ans.** The subjects of race and culture are basic to our daily lives. People generally tend to believe everything that they read in newspapers and see on television to be fact. Readers will be able to relate to my experiences. They have had many of the experiences that I have been faced with. It is one thing to think about these situations and another to see them in print. There is a tendency to think and reflect when you see these things in print that you can relate to.

## **7** Are you going to write a follow up book to see if progress is being made in breaking racial and cultural barriers in tennis?

**Ans.** I will probably do a follow up book. It is always a good idea to monitor progress on such an important topic. Changing things for the better in our diverse society is paramount to progress and moving forward. The more we interact with one another the better we are able to break down the barriers of understanding which leads to better racial harmony.

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## **Are there still issues of Race and equal access in the sport of tennis?**

**Ans.** Importunely the answer is yes! This is true at the grass roots level and certain positions of access and authority within the USTA. As an example the organization instituted a “Minority Participation Program” in 1990. The name has since been changed to “Multicultural Participation.”

This was supposed to be a comprehensive imitative to rid the organization of its well documented history of racial discrimination during the first 69 years of their existence. It is now 20 years later and the struggle continues. I need only point to the fact that the program was put in place to specifically address the problem regarding equal access to African Americans. With the short early period of not allowing Chinese Americans equal access, all other ethic groups were always welcome.

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## **What are some life lessons learned from the sport of Tennis?**

**Ans.** The majority of tennis matches played socially and at amateur tournaments is played without umpires, so you must make your own calls. Honesty comes into play in that you are required to make out calls on your side of the net and your opponent is required to do the same on their side.

Strategy is required, so the ability to think about how you plan to construct points in order to win games is important. Another is conflict resolution on disputed calls. After a match is completed no matter how competitive, both players meet at the net and shake hands. Preparation is another lesson. You need to know what equipment works best for your game and good physical condition will aid your endurance in long matches.

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## **Why is the sport of Tennis so expensive?**

**Ans.** This was true many years ago when there were only a few tennis oriented companies competing against on another in the market place. The explosion of tennis on the sport scene in the 1970’s changed this. Grass roots programs by

the Professional Tennis Registry, the USTA and some sporting goods companies instituted programs to make tennis equipment more affordable.

## **11** What is the (USTA) United States Tennis Association?

**Ans.** Founded in 1881 as The United States Lawn Tennis Association (USLTA), it was and is recognized as the number one tennis organization in the United States. Some years later the name was changed to the United States Tennis Association (USTA). It is the governing body for tennis deemed so by an act of congress. The organization is part of the world body for tennis, the International Tennis Association (ITF). It is the owner of the US Open Championships. One of the “Grand Slam” tournaments and is the richest tournament in terms of prize money.

## **12** What does it mean to be the governing body of tennis in the United States?

**Ans.** As the governing body for tennis in this country the organization is responsible for selecting the US Olympic team, the Davis Cup Team an international men’s competition and the Federation Cup Team an international women’s competition.. All of the afore mentioned compete in international competition.

## **13** What is the US Open tennis Tournament?

**Ans.** The US Open is one of four international major tournaments billed as “The Grand Slams.” The others are The Australian Open, The French Open, and The Wimbledon Championships. It is the richest in terms of prize money awarded. The tournament is owned by the USTA.

Annually the tournament brings in huge revenues for the organization. It was known for many years as the US National Championships in the amateur days of the sport. In 1968 the name was changed to the US Open allowing both pros and amateurs to compete and ushered in the era of prize money. The event has grown over the years and is now the most attended sporting event in the world. The late tennis great and humanitarian Arthur Ashe then competing as an armature was the inaugural winner.

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## **What is the (ATA) American Tennis Association?**

**Ans.** The American Tennis Association (ATA) was founded in 1916. It is the oldest African American sports organization in the United States. It was founded because then Negroes and Chinese Americans were banned from playing or holding any position in the United States Lawn Tennis Association (USLTA). As it was with society in general the USLTA was completely segregated. The (ATA) afforded blacks to play in organized competitive events. Many black professional people gravitated to the organization to enjoy the social aspect and of the sport as well.

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## **How long did the ban last?**

**Ans.** The ban lasted for first 69 years of the USLTA's formation. In 1950 with steady pressure being applied by organizations and prominent white tennis players of the day Althea Gibson's entry was accepted to play in the US National Championships. She became the first African American to play in a USLTA event. The late great player and humanitarian, Arthur Ashe became the first African American male to win a major tennis championship, the first US Open in 1968 formerly known as the US National Championships.

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## **Is there still a need to have a black tennis association and a white tennis association?**

**Ans.** The answer in my view is yes! Even today there still remains an unlevelled playing field. Many opportunities for African Americans and other underserved ethnic populations are not fully addressed or integrated into the system. Until the USTA is more accepting of people of color in leadership and positions of authority the need remains.

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## **What if any barriers are remaining?**

**Ans.** For example the chair umpire is the most visible tennis official at high profile matches. No African American umpire has chaired a semi-final or final match at any of the “Grand Slam” events. These are the highest profile and fan attended tournaments in the world. Another is access to high profile head pro coaching positions at tennis facilities and resorts throughout the country. Within the past 7 years there have been a number of racial discrimination law suits files against the USTA by African Americans trying to work within the system.

## **18** What do you see as the solution to this problem?

**Ans.** As in society many people in the organization hold positions of affluence and power in their daily lives and don't come in contact with people of color on a regular basis. The solution as I see it is to have both work related and social setting that allows the process of a natural flow and exchange of concepts and ideas to promote a natural bonding between the races.

## **19** Do you see an end to racial barriers in tennis?

**Ans.** Yes! Attitudes are beginning to change within the organization. As more African Americans and other people of color integrate into the system and interact and fellowship with the establishment the barriers or race and access will fade away. This can be said of society in general as well.

## **20** Where can I get more information on this subject?

**Ans.** I have written a book, “The Games of Tennis” An African American Journey. It details the struggle to break Racial and Cultural Barriers in the sport of tennis and society. I'd be glad to send you more information of the continuing struggle to level the playing field from the grass courts to the board room. See the information below.

## **About Our Company:**

- Chavis Enterprises, LLC is a multifaceted consulting firm. Specializing in Diversity in the work place concepts, Non-profit corporate restructuring, Multiline insurance consultation, Book authoring and speaking engagements.
- Get my book “The Games of Tennis” An African American Journey at a special discount by filling out the response form.
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## About the Author



Bernard Chavis has served as National President of the American Tennis Association (ATA), President of the USTA Middle States Philadelphia Area Tennis District, and President of the US Professional Tennis Registry (now PTR) in the Middle States Section. He has also been a symposium presenter at national tennis conferences. Mr. Chavis has served on the Boards of the International Tennis Hall of Fame (ITHF), the Tennis Industry Association (TIA), and the USTA Middle States Section. He has also contributed his expertise on the USTA's *Plan for Growth* steering committee as well.

He has the distinction of being the first African American to serve as President of the USTA Philadelphia Area Tennis District (1994) and the first to referee a USTA national championship tournament – the Senior Men's National Grass Court Championships at the Germantown Cricket Club in Philadelphia (1996). He is a Life Member of the USTA, the ATA, and the International Tennis Hall of Fame. In 2005, Chavis was named a "Living American History Maker" by the Berean Institute in Philadelphia.

Mr. Chavis continues to serve as the President/CEO of the Black Tennis Foundation of Philadelphia, Inc., and a nonprofit which he helped to co-found in 1992 to benefit urban youth in the Philadelphia area. He is a Certified PTR instructor and a tournament director at many high profile tournaments in the area. He resides in the Philadelphia suburb of Meadowbrook, Pennsylvania with his wife, Mila and son, Bernard III.

