

A tennis champ shuts herself away - Behind the blinds hides Althea Gibson. Friends say she's ill, poor and embarrassed

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By Amy Ellis Nutt , FOR THE STAR-LEDGER

They stood in a single line stretching across both center court and the generations - 38 former U.S. Open champions, on hand to help dedicate the new Arthur Ashe Stadium at the National Tennis Center in New York.

The announcer called it the greatest assembly of tennis talent ever. As the names of the champions were called out Monday night, photos of each one - some suddenly young again - flashed on the giant TV screen atop the stadium.

Laver and Rosewall, Navratilova and Evert, McEnroe and Lendl . . . octogenerian Don Budge . . . Margaret Court . . . Billie Jean King . . . The names floated down, pages of tennis history were turned.

But when the name of Althea Gibson - a two-time Open champ and the first black person to win the tournament - rang out, the applause in the packed stadium washed down on no one.

Althea Gibson, conspicuous in her absence.

Just 30 miles away, Gibson, who had turned 70 that day, was at home in New Jersey watching the ceremony on TV.

Bruce Levy, assistant director of communications for the United States Tennis Association, said Gibson turned down an invitation to attend.

"She told a member of my staff who called that she was too ill," Levy said last week, "and that she preferred not to be seen in public."

The show simply went on without her.

Althea Gibson won the U.S. Open 40 years ago - 11 years before Arthur Ashe became the first black man to win it. While the former champions and the 22,000 fans at the new stadium paid tribute to the legacy of Ashe's life of quiet dignity, Gibson was alone, trying to maintain a quiet dignity of her own.

In a small garden apartment in East Orange, Althea Gibson lives by herself, keeping even her closest friends on the other side of her locked door. She communicates only

by phone, only when she chooses.

Betty Hicks, a contemporary fellow athlete, said her old friend is virtually indigent.

Former New York City Mayor David Dinkins said he speaks to her on the phone now and then, but she hasn't allowed him to talk to her face to face in years.

Both say Gibson, who was briefly married twice and has no children, lives only on Social Security and Medicare and a few donations - donations that, until recently, Gibson rejected.

Dinkins, who has known Gibson since they met 50 years ago at a now-defunct tennis and golf club in New Jersey, says former tennis players such as King and Zina Garrison have sent money. And several months ago, a fund-raiser in Southern California netted enough money for a new car, a 1997 turquoise Mercury Sable, which is used mostly by a neighbor who runs errands for Gibson.

Another longtime friend, TV tennis commentator Bud Collins, said he spoke with her the day of the Arthur Ashe Stadium dedication.

"She told me she was feeling better physically but still unable to get out of the house. She also said she would be watching the tournament on TV," said Collins, who suggested on the air last week that one of the outside courts at the National Tennis Center be named in Gibson's honor.

Collins also said he "was sorry that during the parade of champions they did not announce it was Althea's 70th birthday and 40th anniversary of her win."

No amount of recognition, however, can change the fact that Gibson's life of late has been one struggle after another. Two winters ago, the heat was turned off briefly in her apartment because of outstanding bills. She had two minor strokes in the 1990s, has lost about 40 pounds from her normally slender 5-foot, 10-inch frame.

And she is slowly dying. A recluse remembered Gibson has told most of her friends, including Dinkins and her onetime doubles partner, Angela Buxton, that she is dying, but not why.

One close friend who asked not to be identified says the tennis great has been ill for decades with a degenerative disease that is slowly eating away at her nervous system. Among the myriad medications she takes is a powerful analgesic for pain.

Several neighbors help Gibson, who once had the most powerful serve in women's tennis, with some of her daily tasks, but few of her friends even know her address. Regarded most of her life as a prickly personality, Gibson wrote in "I Always Wanted to Be Somebody," her 1958 autobiography, that she was generally suspicious of people and was difficult to get to know. She repeatedly has told several friends she wants to be

remembered for what she was, not what she is.

"She's a very proud woman," said Hicks. "She's embarrassed about how she is now."

Hicks was a professional golfer who got to know Gibson after Gibson retired from tennis and joined the LPGA tour in 1963. Only one tennis player - Buxton - has kept in touch.

A native of Great Britain, Buxton has been quoted as saying she and Gibson bonded years ago because of their "outsider status" in the "WASPy" world of tennis: Gibson because she was black, Buxton because she was Jewish.

"She sees very few people because she doesn't want anyone to see her the way she is now," said Buxton.

Dinkins says that when he calls, Gibson does not pick up the phone until she hears his voice on the answering machine.

"She doesn't see people, she doesn't want to come out, and she doesn't welcome guests," Dinkins said. "I know people who've known her for years who haven't seen her."

One of five children, Gibson grew up in a cramped railroad flat on 143rd Street in Harlem. She spent more time playing basketball and going to movies and the weekly stage show at the Apollo than she did going to school.

In her autobiography, she wrote that to avoid regular beatings from her father, who worked part time as a garage mechanic, she would ride the subway all night, often staying away from home for days at a time.

During summers, the New York City Police Athletic League barricaded a number of city blocks, including 143rd, and designated them "playstreets."

Paddle tennis was one of the popular games on Gibson's block and she excelled at it. In the summer of 1940, her talent was recognized by one of the playstreet supervisors. He bought a couple of used tennis rackets for the 13-year-old tomboy and introduced her to the game that would lead her in 1957 to fame - a ticker-tape parade up Broadway, the covers of Sports Illustrated and Time - but never to riches. Made a club member Soon after Gibson picked up a racket, her natural ability caught the attention of black professional Fred Johnson. He played a few sets with her at Harlem's New York Cosmopolitan Club. The club's members were so impressed with Gibson that they voted the young girl a junior member and paid for lessons.

At 14, Gibson won her first title, the New York State Open, which was sponsored by the black American Tennis Association. But not until 1950, when she was 23, was she finally allowed to play in tournaments sponsored by the then all-white United States Lawn Tennis Association.

Six more years passed before Gibson, having honed her serve-and-volley game, exploded onto the tennis scene by winning the French Open. She was the first black person to win a Grand Slam event. It was 1956, and her two-year reign atop the tennis world, when she would win her five Grand Slam singles titles, had begun.

By the time she retired from tennis in 1958, Gibson had won 11 majors in both singles and doubles. But at 30 years of age, she realized that, with no professional tennis circuit for women, she needed to find another way to make ends meet.

"I have no lofty, overpowering ambition," she wrote in her book. "All I want is a regular income and no worries. I don't feel any need to be King Midas. I just want to be reasonably successful and live a normal life with all the conveniences to make it so."

In 1960, Gibson stayed solvent by touring with the Harlem Globetrotters. Gibson and tennis glamour girl Karol Fageros would put on an exhibition before the Globetrotters' basketball games. The yearlong cross-country tour netted Gibson close to \$100,000, the most money she would ever make.

A movie role Before she became the Globetrotters' front act, Gibson appeared in the John Wayne movie "The Horse Soldiers." Set in the Civil War, the movie cast her as the freed, but loyal, slave of a Southern belle. It was Gibson's one acting venture, though she sang twice on "The Ed Sullivan Show," in 1958 and '59.

Gibson, in fact, longed to make a living as a singer, and she even cut a record. But when her tennis fame started to fade, so did the singing opportunities.

In 1963, at the relatively advanced age of 36, Gibson qualified for the women's professional golf tour. Hicks recalls that Gibson "was a long hitter, but wild." With her late start in the sport, she was never consistent enough to be a contender, and earned little money in her brief time on the tour.

In the mid-1970s and '80's, the former Wimbledon and U.S. Open champion gave private tennis lessons at the Rallye Racquet Club in East Orange, which now houses a company that manufactures industrial washing machines. Her only steady income, however, was from a part-time, \$7,000-a-year job as the New Jersey state athletic commissioner for boxing and wrestling. In 1977, Gibson resigned to run for the state Senate on the Democratic ticket, but she lost the election.

Then, in 1990, at the age of 63, she tried to qualify a second time for the LPGA tour. Out of 195 players competing for a handful of spots, Gibson finished 195th.

The two-story brick building

where Gibson lives lies in a sort of no-man's land, with tree-lined avenues of middle-class homes on one side and, on the other, streets heaped with garbage bags leaking

litter onto the sidewalk. In front of Gibson's apartment are neatly trimmed bushes and a small freshly mowed patch of grass no bigger than a child's sandbox. Next door is an empty lot. It is a recycler's dream: a random assortment of cans and bottles, and a half-empty pint of

Southern Comfort that someone forgot to drain.

To her neighbors, Gibson has changed little over the years, though her gait is slower and her hair grayer. "She still has the same great smile, still shakes your hand and always asks how you are," said Karen Cooper, a schoolteacher who has lived several doors down from Gibson for 15 years.

Cooper recalled how, years ago,

Gibson would sometimes come upon a few of the neighborhood children hitting tennis balls against the back of the apartment building. Without fail, the two-time Wimbledon champion would stop and watch them, then give them a tip or two.

Juana Carson, who grew up in the neighborhood and still visits her mother there weekly, said everyone in the complex keeps an eye on Gibson, but always from a respectful distance.

"We all know she's been ill," Carson said, "but when we see her taking out her garbage or going to her car, she doesn't say much. She's still very polite and all, but she's just very, very private."

In all the years that Cooper, Carson and Carson's mother have known Gibson, none has exchanged more than a few words at a time with the tennis great.

Bless this house' A sign below the peephole on Gibson's apartment door reads, "Bless this house and all who enter." A reporter leaves a fruit basket on her doorstep. Attached is a note asking Gibson if she feels well enough to grant an interview for this article. As the reporter drives away, she notices the basket is gone, scooped up inside. The next day the reporter returns and rings the bell, already suspecting what Gibson's reply will be.

Five minutes go by and the reporter turns to leave. At that moment, from behind the blinds that are always closed over Gibson's windows, someone peeks out. The reporter meets the ex-champion's eyes for a fraction of a second. In the next fraction, the blinds snap together again, like the halves of a clam shutting tight against the outside world. There is no sound from inside. No voice. Somewhere in the distance, a mockingbird sings out.