

Angela Buxton and Althea Gibson

In my youth, Angela Buxton was the darling of the Anglo Jewish sporting scene.

She was the most successful Jewish, and indeed British tennis player of the 1950s. In 1956 she reached the singles final at Wimbledon, the first Briton to do so in 17 years. She won two grand slam victories in the Doubles at Wimbledon and Roland Garros in Paris, with her playing partner, the celebrated Black American champion, Althea Gibson. She was ranked 6th in the world. She represented Great Britain in the Wightman Cup in 1954, 1955, and 1956 and won the women's singles title at the Maccabiah Games of 1953. An injury forced her to retire in 1957.

She married Donald Silk, a flamboyant and scandal-prone Jewish lawyer, and businessman. He was a member of the Board of Jewish Deputies and represented the Western Synagogue in London (a synagogue of which I later became the rabbi). The marriage was not a happy one and it ended in divorce. But it produced two sons Ben and Joseph. Both were pupils at Carmel College; kind and generous like their mother.

She was born in Liverpool on 16 August 1934. Her grandparents had immigrated to England from Russia, fleeing from the pogroms in the early 1900s. They changed their name from Greenberg to Buxton. Angela spent her early years in Australia where she took up tennis. She showed tremendous promise as an athlete but when she moved back to Britain, anti-Semitism dogged her. She was repeatedly refused access to training facilities because she was Jewish. It was thanks to Simon Marks, of Marks and Spencer, that she was able to train on his private indoor court.

She was eventually allowed to play at the Cumberland Lawn Tennis Club near her home in North London but she was repeatedly blackballed from membership. She recalled "I had to fill in a form: name, address, telephone number and then religion. I had several lessons there with Bill Blake, and I kept asking him about membership. Eventually, he begged me not to keep on asking. When I asked why he replied that it was because I was Jewish."

She struck up a very warm friendship with the great American player Althea Gibson. They had both suffered from discrimination. After they won the women's doubles title at Wimbledon, one English newspaper reported the event with a story titled "Minorities Win". "A victory for a Jewish girl born in the north of England but educated in the wider world, and her Black friend from Harlem. The game has seen nothing like it before." Gibson was certainly the far better player but their friendship continued outside of the courts.

After her Wimbledon victory, Buxton applied for admission to the All England Tennis club. She assumed she would be admitted as one of England's top tennis players. However, her application (along with Gibson's) was never accepted. Over the next 63 years, Buxton continued to apply for admission without success. In an interview in 2004, she said: "Anti-Semitism is still endemic.

The mere fact that I'm still not a member speaks for itself." The chairman of the club, when asked, said he could not comment until he investigated further. And of course, nothing more was said.

She never forgot Gibson, whose own journey had been more dramatically wretched than hers. She had risen from poverty and abuse as a child, battled against outright hostility, to become one of the greatest American athletes. She won 11 Grand Slam tournaments. According to Bob Ryland a tennis contemporary and former coach of the Williams sisters, "She was one of the greatest players who ever lived." After her tennis career, in the early 1960s, she also became the first Black player to compete on the Women's Professional Golf Tour. Over the years she was feted and recognized for the great athlete she was. In 1991 Gibson became the first woman to receive the Theodore Roosevelt Award and was cited for "symbolizing the best qualities of competitive excellence and good sportsmanship, and for her significant contributions to expanding opportunities for women and minorities through sports."

Both Buxton and Gibson were outsiders. Wrong religion, wrong color. They were not only excluded from clubs but also shunned by other players. But their successes began to have an effect. Complacent, racist, and anti-Semitic officials and authorities were forced to come to terms because of their successes. Nevertheless, feeling the coldness in England, Buxton moved to the US. Even there she encountered anti-Semitism in sporting circles on the west coast. Eventually, she settled in Florida, occasionally commuting to Manchester in the summer.

During the nineteen nineties Althea Gibson fell on hard times. She suffered two aneurysms and a stroke. She called Angela and asked for help and Angela responded by calling around on her behalf. Getting little reaction from her initial pleas, she had a letter published in Tennis Week magazine in 1996, which brought Gibson's plight to the attention of the public, and donations poured in. She was taken care of and ended her days in comfort. Buxton and Gibson's friendship lasted almost 40 years, until Gibson's death in 2003. Although they were outsiders, together they made history.

Those were the days when Blacks and Jews marched, stood, and fought together against prejudice. Things have changed so much, that nowadays, certainly in the USA, the two communities are, sadly, drifting further apart politically.

Angela Buxton died last August in Florida at the age of 84. History is fickle, memories are short, but as the Bible says, it is a good name that matters most. She was a determined and dignified, sporting tennis player, a committed and proud Jewess, and a generous, kind human being.