

The Arthur Ashe legacy

Paul Kalyesubula highlights the importance of sports as a tool for rights and health advocacy

February was Black History Month, and on the 22nd Kampala hosted the grand final of Arthur Ashe tennis tournament. This was a culmination of a four-month campaign that was held across the country. Fifty players qualified from the five Ugandan regions represented by the districts of Fort Portal, Hoima, Arua, Jinja and Gulu.

Ashe was a legendary US tennis player and icon of the civil rights movement who campaigned for social justice in the health sector and particularly access to HIV/AIDS treatment services. At the handover of the trophy, the charge d'affaires at the American embassy, Christopher Kraft, paid tribute to the sports genius of Ashe and his advocacy work.

According to Phil Dimon, the embassy spokesperson, Ashe is particularly acclaimed for disclosing his HIV positive status in 1988. 'This was a time when stigma of HIV/AIDS was at its peak. For a person of his celebrity status was almost inconceivable for someone to disclose his status. He used the later part of his life to engage the public and policy makers to rally against HIV/AIDS as a public health hazard.'

To carry on his legacy, the American embassy in conjunction with Uganda Tennis Association (UTA) & Uganda National Young Positives (UNYPA) organised a tennis tournament. Through UTA, a selection of schools took part in the regional tennis clinics. The selection was done to ensure that the participants were representative of schools from the respective regions.

Sports have a tremendous power mobilise people and command particular appeal among the young. 'A message that is wrapped in a sports campaign will reach to a wide section of people both young and old alike. So the chances of acceptability and translation into actual practice are higher', explains Phil Dimon. 'On the other hand, sports integrates both hard and soft skills; these are key attributes that young people ought to embrace in order to make it in life.'

With availability of funding, the tournament will be replicated in other regions of Uganda on an annual basis. 'Already it has proved a great success in terms of introducing young people to something new (table tennis) and the game has been embraced with amazing excitement and interest' says Ronald Hawkins, the public affairs officer at the American mission in Uganda. 'In particular, many girls have come on board; a positive development that can be replicated in other fields of life including academic and professional areas.'

Paul Kalyesubula is an advocacy officer at National Community of Women Living with HIV/AIDS in Uganda (NAWOLA)

As a civil rights activist, Arthur campaigned for the integration of marginalised people, including women, into the mainstream. African-American women have attained epic sporting feats.

Soft skills, high ambitions

Martin Odocken, the secretary of Uganda Tennis Association (UTA), acknowledges that through sports key values of discipline, hard work and teamwork are embraced and practiced. 'On top of the "hard skills" of the game we strongly appeal to the psychological mindset attitude of players by imparting the values of persistence, dedication and teamwork towards a common goal.' In football the analogy of the goal applies strongly. 'Certainly, the values on which tennis is premised can be reciprocated in other fields of the players' lives including academic, professional and social endeavours.'

Surprisingly, perhaps, most of the players handled a tennis racket for the very first time. Hawkins acknowledges that this step is a source of great inspiration to venture into areas they have never attempted before.

'Through curiosity innovations have advanced humanity to new levels have been arrived at. Similarly, in disclosing his HIV/AIDS status Arthur did what no other person of his status could dare.'

Arthur's HIV/AIDS advocacy ushered in a wave of public attention and policy focus. On a global scale, advocacy for HIV/AIDS has birthed interventions like the Presidential Emergency Plan for Aids Relief (PEPFAR) and UNAIDS. These programmes have supported countries technically and financially to set up policy and institutional frameworks to address the pandemic.

Sports as a lobby and advocacy tool can be used to improve the health of populations.

