

Ora Mae Washington: The Queen of Tennis

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On January 23, 1899, Ora Mae Washington was born in Caroline County, Virginia, to parents James and Laura O. Young-Washington. In 1912, her family moved to the Germantown area of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania looking for better working opportunities. For the first twenty-five years of her life, she was not seriously engaged in sports and never participated in an organized sport. Tragedy would strike her family when one of her sisters passed away; she struggled with grieving and sports was suggested as a means of therapy. Tennis was the original sport that Ora chose to play and she began her career at the Germantown YMCA. A year into playing tennis, she improved so much that she won her first national championship and entered a national tournament for black tennis players. Ora's skills were on full display and she put the tennis world on notice that the reign on "The Queen of Tennis" was upon them. She became the dominant black tennis player of her era, winning the American Tennis Association's national crown in 1929 and holding the crown until 1936. She was so much better than her opponents that she would go full seasons without losing a tennis match.

From the mid-1930's through the early 1940's Ora would win eight national singles crowns, twelve doubles crowns, and three mixed doubles crowns. She was the darling of the black sports world and was unknowingly inspiring future black tennis champions. Hellen Willis Moody was the best white female tennis player in the world at that time and Ora had her eyes on a match with Hellen. The Jim Crow era was alive and well in the United States and Ora's tennis success did not shield her from the racism. Because Ora was a black woman Hellen refused to play her in a match to determine who the best female tennis player in America. Ora was disappointed but not deterred. She would continue to dominate tennis until the 1940's. Unlike most female athletes of that era, Ora was not just a one sport woman, basketball was her second love.

The Germantown Hornets is the name of the team Ora played basketball for during the 1930's and 1940's. The Hornets were originally sponsored by the local YMCA before they became good enough to compete as a professional team. Ora helped lead her team to a 22-1 record and the female national championship. The Hornets followed up their national championship by winning

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thirty-three games in a row. What was unique about the Hornets is the team was composed of black women but they competed against black women's teams, white women's teams and, men's teams; defeating them all. She would leave the Hornets and begin playing with the Philadelphia Tribune in 1932 as the team's center and coach. The team was sponsored by a black-owned newspaper *The Philadelphia Tribune* which allowed it to travel across the country competing against a wide range of opponents. Not only was Ora the team's best player but she was their leading scorer. The Tribune played any team that was not afraid to face them; Ora was considered the best black female basketball player in the world, she led her team to eleven consecutive championships demolishing their competition.

The 1940's was the time period that Ora retired from playing both tennis and basketball; The "Queen of Tennis" set the basketball world on fire. To supplement the little pay she earned from tennis and basketball she worked as a domestic to make ends meet. After retiring from sports she became an entrepreneur, brought an apartment building, and secured herself financially for the rest of her life. She used her free time to hold tennis clinics for the Germantown youth to expose them to the sport. She was truly a titan within the sports world, over her career she won 201 championships from tennis and basketball but was virtually unknown outside of the black sports world. She would die in 1971 at the age of seventy-three as a pioneer in the world of women's sports.

In 1976, she was inducted into the Black Athletes Hall of Fame for her accomplishments. In 1986, she was inducted into Temple University's Sports Hall of Fame. And in 2009, she was inducted into the Women's Basketball Hall of Fame. She is often forgotten but her impact on tennis and basketball is still felt today. She opened the tennis doors for future black players like Althea Gibson, Author Ashe, and the Williams sisters. Her dominance on the basketball court helped pave the way for black female basketball players such as Cheryl Miller, Lisa Lesley and Maya Moore. The WNBA is able to thrive today because she helped black women understand that not only can they play sports but they can dominate the sports. To the "Queen of Tennis" and women's basketball legend Ora Mae Washington, we proudly stand on your shoulders.

J.A. Ward

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<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3e8nhpYMCpl>

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