

Interview with Sydney Llewellyn
Date: October 21, 1984
Interviewer: N/A
Camera Rolls: 10, 11, 12
Sound Rolls: 8, 9
Team: V. Calindez

Interview gathered as part of *Black Champions*. Produced by Miles Educational Film Productions, Inc. Housed at the Washington University Film and Media Archive, William Miles Collection.

Interview with Sydney Llewellyn, conducted by Miles Educational Film Productions, Inc. on October 21, 1984 for *Black Champions*. Washington University Libraries, Film and Media Archive, William Miles Collection.

Note: These transcripts contain material that did not appear in the final program. Only text appearing in bold italics was used in the final version of *Black Champions*.

[camera roll 10]

[sound roll 8]

00:00:00:00 — 00:04:27:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

Slate.

Camera Crew Member #2:

Sydney Llewellyn. Sound roll eight, camera roll ten, sound twenty-one.

[slate]

Interviewer:

OK. Sydney Llewellyn, you have been around tennis, and therefore around champions in tennis, for many, many years. What produces a champion? What is it in that person who becomes a champion at tennis that perhaps doesn't exist in people who play weekends or a few days a week?

Sydney Llewellyn:

Well, it has [clears throat], it ha-, it has been often said champions are made, they're not born. I've found that you can teach a kid how to hit a ball, and you can teach him disciplines, but if that kid doesn't have a particular drive or hunger, and want what's at the end of the line, he's

not gonna go too far. There's a certain ingredient that a champion must have that one can hardly give to them. And [clears throat] one who has this ingredient becomes then a prime subject for promotion, for help, and for discipline in whatever sport that is. In tennis, it is a very demanding sport. Natural ability at times can be a handicap. For instance, it begins with the ready position, and from the ready position you are ready to go to an, a missile that's coming towards you, but you have to go to it and meet it. You have to be taught to get the right ready position so that you can be repetitive. Natural ability, you do a thing one way this time, you do it another way the other. When you are taught discipline, you have the same approach to the same situation at all time. You can be rep-, repetitive. That's one aspect of it. I had, I have known a couple of black professionals who coached champions before me in other sports. I, myself, was influenced by, by a coach who, who helped Sugar Ray to develop his skills. And I [clears throat] noticed that he used to take these kids to the Salem Crescent. Had five or six kids with him. Some of the boys that I've, the older men I've used to hang out with was t-, telling me stories like, his wife told him to give up these kids and get a job. But he stuck with them, and eventually about three fighters came out of that group. Gus Levine, Spider Bruce, and Su-, Sugar Ray Robinson. The name of this man was George Gainford, and today I think he has profited from having taught those kids. [clears throat] ***I, myself, have taught many, many currently employed teaching professionals and quite a few ATA champions, and two world champions. What do they have in common? Speaking in terms of Althea Gibson, she had, she was a great competitor, and she would compete at anything. At bowling, at playing pool, at—***

[missing frames]

Sydney Llewellyn:

—golf, what-, whatever. Now, she had that drive. Arthur Ashe, whom I taught also, he had a very subtle—

[missing frames]

Sydney Llewellyn:

—desire. Very subtle, low-key, but, but a persistent desire to win. And a love to win, a love for the—

[missing frames]

Sydney Llewellyn:

—game. I contend that it takes a chump to make a champ, and a champ will never make another champion, because a champion will never be a chump. If you look through history, you find that those who became champions seldom ever make a champ of another person, because to make a champion you have to have altru-, you have to be an altruistic person. You have to have a willingness to place a person up a-, and above you, beyond heights you will never—

[missing frames]

Sydney Llewellyn:

—*reach*. And you have to have a lot of love for, and persistence, and be able to take insults.
[Note Interview gathered as part of Black Champions; Episode 2]

[background banter]

00:04:28:00 — 00:05:55:00

Interviewer #1:

Why are there s-, relatively few black champion tennis players today, when we see so many champions in other sports here? We see champions in basketball, and boxing, and baseball. Why a relatively low percentage of black tennis players?

Sydney Llewellyn:

Well, I don't know. It's something about my people that give them a certain pride, where they want to do it themselves [sic]. I wanna do it my way. And this alienates them from, from what they really need, because there, there is no substitute for discipline and for coaching. There could be, often times the least, the least suggestion can change the complexion of a match, can change a losing match into a winning match. And if you don't have that type of assistance playing tennis, you're not gonna get too far. Because it's a lonely game. When you are out there on that court by yourself, thousands of people watching you, it's a very lonely game, and if you, if you have someone you can look in the stands and get a little spiritual help from, it goes a long way. [clears throat] I, I have found that playing tennis is all right. Competitive tennis is another aspect of tennis in itself. But to make a champion, you should help a kid very early, how to win. Let him get a taste of winning. You must cultivate a winning attitude to be a champion.

Camera Crew Member #1:

Cut.

[rollout on camera roll]

[wild sound]

[camera roll 11]

00:05:56:00 — 00:14:09:00

Camera Crew Member #2:

Sound twenty-two.

[slate]

Interviewer #1:

Sydney Llewellyn, let's talk about championship coaching. You coached Althea Gibson. I wonder if you'd tell us what you saw in her game when she came to you, and what you tried to do with that game.

Sydney Llewellyn:

Well, [clears throat] it goes back to the first black professional that we, that we ever had, was Fred Johnson. He was a one-armed man. Played with one arm. Now, a one-arm man must, of necessity, hold the racket in a manner that he can hit [demonstrates] forehand and backhand with the same grip. And Fred Johnson was the only teacher around, really, and he taught most all his clients the continental grip, which was a grip where you brought the racket up [demonstrates]. Because you're going up, you go around in a circle. You're going up and around. And that style permeated the game when I came on the scene. [clears throat] I, when they discovered Althea playing paddle tennis, they brought her to Mr. Johnson, and had him to teach her. And he taught her what he knew, which was the continental grip. I, myself, started tennis as a ball-boy, at the St. Andrew's Club in Kingston. And the ball-boys used to play in the street with board-bats, that sort of thing. Every time we played was for m-, for money. So my intensity was always there. [clears throat] I came to New York at the age of nineteen years old, and didn't meet anyone that said tennis. And so I played the game that my friends played. Eventually, one of my friends, colleagues, who used to find me games and bet on it, that sorta thing, invited me to go to a country club with him for a weekend vacation. I was a little reluctant, but after he started tellin' me about the facilities that they had—they had a lake. I liked to swim. They had tennis courts. And when he said, tennis courts, I asked, "When we leaving?" I went up there. They had a wall. That evening, when I got there, I was on the wall hitting. This is my first time since I was a kid that I had the privilege of hittin' a tennis ball. Somebody would come out, and we'd go on the concrete court and hit. OK. They had a tournament, the Fourth of July, that weekend. I won the tournament, to the dismay of these fellas that took me up there. What's this with tennis, they said. I said, this is my game. They said, I thought pool was your game. I said, pool is your game, and I learned it. So they said, well, why aren't you at the Cosmopolitan Tennis Club? That Monday, I was at the ten-, Cosmopolitan Tennis Club and where I met Mr. Johnson for the first time. [plane flies over] Mr. Johnson, I walked up to ask him to, that I was interested in takin' tennis lessons. And he said, I'm not interested in teachin' any old man tennis. I was thirty-five years old. So, to myself, I say, I should learn this game and teach it, because that's no at-, way to speak to anyone. So, I eventually got him to teach me. He taught me everything he knew, and he made me a great professional, because all the things he taught me was wrong. It was good for a one-armed man, but it was wrong for a two-armed man. And so, I went to, I read all the books there were, I went to every tournament I could go to—went to Forest Hills, I went to many tournament. Wherever there was a tournament, I was there. Many times I was the only

black there. But I was studying my craft, because I knew that tennis would be my life. I, before, before considering professional, [clears throat] I wanted to have a, I wanted to have some kinda amateur standing. So I set my goal to be in the first ten in New York state. That occurred three years later. Then, with being first ten, with that, I applied for professional. In other words, I joined the P-, USP-, -TA, professional organization, and was then a qualified pro, because they tested you, checked your bankrupt, your bank-book out, your references, and all that. And I started teaching then. My first student was Bill Davis. Bill was at the club there, and Bill one day, after teaching him for what, some time, met Althea in a tournament, and she was having trouble with the continental grip that Fred Johnson had taught her. So Bill said, why don't you see Sid, I think he can help you. Now Althea was noticeable. We, we were on a collision course, her and I, at this club, because I was so intense in tennis that they call me Mr. T, but it was Mr. T-ha-ha, you see? And she came, and she used to have a little entourage with her. She played for her audience, and she'd leave. Now, but she had everything but humility, obviously. Well, when she came to me and said, Bill told me that you can help me, that was the display of humility, I thought. And I said, well, I'll, I can help you, but it would take two years for my teaching to manifest itself. And you'd better f-, wait till you finish school. So, she used to go to, she was going to Tallahassee at the time, in Florida. And she came on and played tennis during her vacation. So during those times, I used to rent a room, got, had the privilege of, of a room in the YW-, YMCA so we could practice at night, because I said, the people you are playing, or are about to play, they follow the sun to play tennis, and you gotta make it up by playing at night. We'd work at night in, in this gym, and practicing volleys. And we work in the days at the, I had to take her to a place where there was no audience, because if there's any audience she becomes the great Miss Gibson. So [laughs], I would take her to 233rd street early in the morning, and z-, I'd zone off the tennis court. She had to serve in zones in the tennis court. Not just in service box, but in zones in the box. So she had a great serve, [clears throat] and a volley, and that sort of thing. Now Althea was a very, very aggressive person. She gave the men trouble, and Bill Davis was a man's champion. She could beat him, two out of three. So working with her, I imparted to her a, a thing I call the theory of correct returns, which most teachers would refer to as tactics and strategy. When I first started, got into tennis, to teach it, my friend, Panama Al Brown, who was a fighter, used to—he was a great fighter, and he lived in Paris. He came to my home one day, and he said, what are you into now, Sid? I say, I'm into tennis. He says, ah, a companionment. I said, what do you mean? He says, my friend [unintelligible] teaches tennis, and he teaches you to accompany the swing. Like you do this [demonstrates], and you do this [demonstrates]. You accompany the swing. You don't, you don't do just arm. So that influenced what I taught, my swing. How to swing your total body on, on both sides. And I've taught this to ch-, to Althea, and taught this to all the other champions that I've worked with ever since. I teach the theory of correct returns. I came up with the return of serve that I teach, that is just now becoming popular after twenty-seven years. This, this return of serve is just now becoming popular, and that's the one she used around the world, when she won eighteen out of nineteen tournaments on the tour. She was using the theory of correct returns and the, what I call the return of serve. This, I think, to be a champion, you must have a great serve. I would settle for a good serve, but you must have a great return of serve, because, like most games, you win, you win with defense, and if you have a great return of serve, you'll, you'll certainly get to the top in tennis.

00:14:10:00 — 00:16:14:00

Interviewer #1:

Sydney Llewellyn, would you describe for us the term you just used, the theory of correct returns.

Sydney Llewellyn:

The theory of correct returns. Well, it's based on the natural. If you put two players on the court that has never played tennis before, and give them each a racket, tell 'em to hit the ball and try to get the last word in - A would hit to B on an angle. Now B, then, would hit where A isn't, to the widest part from A. That's natural. If you hit there, your opponent is gonna hit here, if you hit here — so I went just opposite to the natural theory. Why should I learn what is natural? So, I decided that the thing to do is to, when a person hits cross-court, use the flight of the oncoming ball as a guide, and hit back cross-court. If you two players are playing the same thing, doing the same thing, eventually two, one of two things is going to happen. Player hits me this ball, my return [points] may either at times take 'em off-court. Well, whenever you're off-court, the theory changes. You hit down the line. The other thing that might happen in th-, an exchange of cross-courts shots is, I may hit, one may hit short. If you hit short, the theory changes. You hit down the line. But as long as your balls are coming deep, you hit cross-court. And you change a theory whenever your, your opponent think that they can anticipate you. This you do on both sides. Person's hitting four hands cross-court, use the g-, the line of flight as a guide and hit back cross-court. Initially, you learn your own inadequacies, because you're trying to hit cross-court. The ball is in the court, but it's over there, which is not what you're aiming for. But eventually you will have a number of, of controlled returns.

Interviewer #1:

Cut.

[rollout on camera roll]

[cut]

[camera roll 12]

[sound roll 9]

00:16:15:00

Camera Crew Member #2:

Champions. Bill Miles Productions. Sound roll nine, camera roll twelve, sound twenty-three.

[slate]

Sidney Llewellyn:

[pause] Your quest—

Interviewer #1:

Sydney Llewellyn, you've talked about tennis theory, that tennis is a game that has to be thought as well as played. I wonder if you'd pursue that lead.

Sydney Llewellyn:

Yes. Well, tennis is a, is a game played with your, your entire body. The swing should—

Camera Crew Member #2:

Cut.

Sydney Llewellyn:

—you should accompany the sw—

[wild sound]

[production discussion]

Camera Crew Member #1:

Are we cut?

[cut]

00:16:43:00 — 00:21:22:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

Speed.

Interviewer #1:

Stick it.

Camera Crew Member #2:

Sound twenty-four.

Interviewer #1:

Sydney Llewellyn, I wonder if you'd again discuss tennis theory with us.

Sydney Llewellyn:

Yeah, well, we have come up with, we have come up with a gadget now, to teach tennis to individuals before they come on the court, and without equipment. We contend that it's very difficult to teach the choreography of tennis when you put a gadget like this [demonstrates] in a person's hand with a dozen variables, and hurl a missile at them, and tell them to coil, step, and uncoil. [demonstrates] It's very difficult. So, we have a gadget here. [demonstrates] You can carry it in a pocket, as you see. And with this gadget, we can teach every aspect of tennis with, before the person touches the racket, so that when they get to the racket they know exactly what to do. [demonstrates] Now put this on, put it on securely. [demonstrates] As you see, it's an elastic with a footpiece, two elastic cables with a footpiece. And you put the hand, [clears throat] handpiece through, leave your thumb out. [demonstrates] Now, this was invented primarily for, to teach the serve. Now, in the serve, you're supposed to take your racket down, [demonstrates] and around, and toss the ball up, and then hit it out in the court. Now, with this gadget, you can do it in any sequence you want. This first [demonstrates]. If you relax, it brings you down. This first, and then that, [demonstrates], or you can throw the ball up first and then come up, [raising throwing hand, then serving hand] whichever you want. I teach this. Throw the ball up, simultaneously, get around and come up and you hit. [demonstrates] You hit, and follow through. If you just hit the ball like this, [demonstrates] you get no stretch, you get no extension. You reach up, throw the racket, [demonstrates] and follow through. Now, for the ground strokes. It begins with the ready position. You pivot. [demonstrates] Notice that [clears throat] the movements that you have to play tennis with, your physical movements, are, are, are the same movements that you use in other sports. A prize fighter, a fighter, punches like this, [demonstrates] with his whole body, not just from the feet. With his whole body. Now in tennis you turn, [demonstrates] you step, and you swing. Now you notice that this thing enables you to feel the swing from beginning to end. Backhand, you turn, keep tension on the cable. The main thing, if you just hold it like this, it's nothing. But as long as you keep tension on, you'll feel it in your shoulder—you turn, [demonstrates] you step, and you swing, all the way out. The swing is the thing, what you do from here out. [demonstrates] On the back forehand, you turn, [demonstrates] you step, and you swing. Now I start with teaching this, I start teaching this by teaching the volleys. Here's the volley. Reach, [demonstrates]—assume you're gonna volley a high ball. You reach, [demonstrates] do the footwork, and hit the ball. You reach, [demonstrates] do the footwork, and hit the ball. Now the footwork I teach is the same footwork for this. You get in. [demonstrates] The same footwork, [demonstrates] for the backhand and forehand. But you teach, just have the person reach up. [demonstrates] B-, be sure that they do the footwork, [demonstrates] and meet the ball. See, and the stretch is there. If you relax, it brings you down. Now you do it here, [demonstrates] any way you want it. [demonstrates] There. On the ground stroke, you pivot, [demonstrates] keep the tension on, step, and swing. Pivot, [demonstrates] step—notice that my whole body swings. [clears throat] [swings racket carefully] That's very difficult to teach. Most persons with a racket in a hand hitting the

backhand hit like, [demonstrates] swing around here. The swing is through. [demonstrates] Your handle and everything [demonstrates] goes right out. Same thing on the forehand. You don't swing from here [demonstrates] to here. You get no stretch if you swing this way. [demonstrates] You gotta swing [demonstrates] out, through the ball. Now, at the end of your swing, you bring the rear foot up [demonstrates] to the forward foot. Most persons will hit like this, [demonstrates] and bring this foot back [demonstrates]. Now the fallacy with that is, now, when you hit the ball [demonstrates], all your weight's on the forward foot. Why bring, why bring the weight to the, to the idle foot? Bring the idle foot [demonstrates] to the weight. Economy of movement. You pivot, [demonstrates] you step, you, you bring the idle foot to the weight. And you end rea-, [laughs] in ready position. Rather than do the natural thing, which is, [demonstrates]. You see that all the time, see?

00:21:23:00 — 00:22:36:00

Interviewer #1:

I wonder if you'd talk about your notion that tennis theory is related to zen and—

Sydney Llewellyn:

[coughs]

Interviewer #1:

—other philosophical theories.

Sydney Llewellyn:

Well, [coughs] the same, as I said before - as I said before, this fighter, this friend of mine, Panama Al Brown, taught me the principle of having your weight back and going through. [demonstrates] Now you could do it this way, [demonstrates] but if you do it wit' cher whole body, [demonstrates] you find that this is a carry over. This movement here, [demonstrates] of your whole body swinging together, is relative to most all sports. Even a fighter, a fighter punches [demonstrates] this way. The ones that knock people out [clears throat] does this. [demonstrates] Other just thump from up here. [demonstrates] But to learn how to punch, you punch, [demonstrates] everything right from here. In, in, in zen and archery, it's the same thing. When they release, they release in a manner that the whole weight goes [clears throat] with what they're doing. So this is a carry over, this movement here. [demonstrates] A carry over in many sports. In baseball, baseball player, the best baseball player, hit [demonstrates] and pivot through. You gotta hit and pivot [demonstrates] your weight through the stroke. This is like, pivoting your weight [demonstrates] through the stroke, your entire body weight, which is essential to a swing.

00:22:37:00 — 00:25:13:00

Interviewer #1:

I wonder if you would complete the sentence for us. We talked about this before. Would you complete the sentence that begins with the words, to be a champion?

Sydney Llewellyn:

To be a champion, one must be dedicated to a sport, and they should relate to someone who knows the history of that particular sport and is firm in their conviction. You should have one, one theory that you learn, and follow, and develop. Changing, changing from one person to the other in different styles f-, seldom ever help. But [clears throat] to be a champion, it takes dedication and work. I think a person—it helps to be spiritual. All the players that I've ever worked with, champion, after we leave the court, we go h-, to my house and we go into theory. We read the Bible, just certain books that I recommend. The Book of Ecclesiastes, for instance. I recommend that book, because it teaches, it tells you about yourself, you see. And [clears throat] I teach them what I learned from George Washington Carver when I was in Tuskegee. He said, start where you are, with what you have; make something, and never be satisfied. Then I, I, I insist that they learn, that they learn that, what they have written over the, the doorway in Wimbledon. "If you can meet with Triumph and Disaster and treat those two impostors just the same." You see, they have to learn [clears throat] that sort of thing. And there are many, many, many, many poems I know, that I teach my students to help them. Like, "Lives of great men all remind us / We can make our lives sublime, / And, departing, leave behind us / Footprints on the sands of time." Each one of us have the privilege of doing that. And I have to get this over to my student that they can find themselves. Because without a, a, a good attitude, you can never be a champion. This game, this tennis game, I find it doesn't matter who you were or what you are when you start playing tennis. If you gonna get good at tennis, it's gonna be when you divest yourself of all nonsense and get real spiritual, and real w-, with the game. And that goes for Mr. McEnroe. He has just became [sic] professional recently, a few months ago. When he stopped talking, and sta—and he has been playing better tennis as a result of that. [clears throat]

Interviewer #1:

Cut.

Sydney Llewellyn:

OK.

Camera Crew Member #1:

Cut.

Interviewer #1:

Beautiful.

Sydney Llewellyn:

Thank you.

[cut]

[end of interview]

00:25:14:00

[Note: last 02:15 minutes the file is footage of Sydney Llewellyn practicing tennis with Althea Gibson.]

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