

Bob Ryland Traveled the Back Roads of Tennis

Negro Star's Opportunities in Big-Time Came Too Late

By CHARLES FRIEDMAN

Bob Ryland was back on the courts at Forest Hills, but he was many, many years too late.

One of the nation's outstanding Negro tennis players, he was surrounded the other day by a group of youngsters at the West Side Club, where he was assisting Bill Lufler, the club pro, in a series of free clinics sponsored by the Eastern Tennis Patrons.

As he instructed the youngsters, mostly novices, on gripping the racquet and placing their feet, Ryland would occasionally glance up at the West Side's ivy-covered stadium, where national tennis champions are crowned.

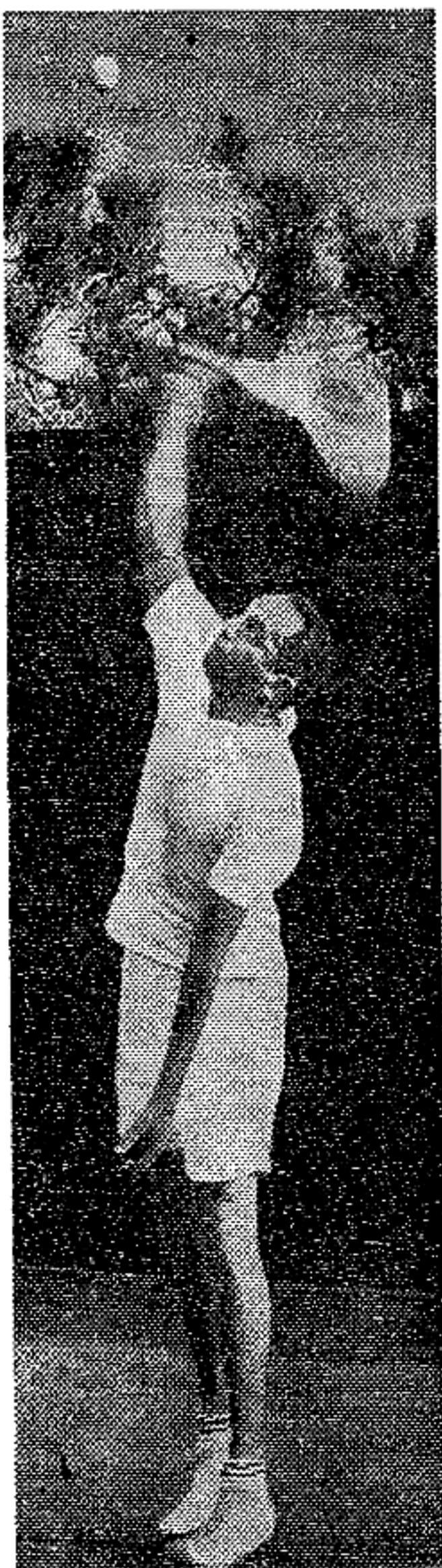
"In my prime I think I might have been up there with the top 10," he said with a soft voice and a modest smile. "I did get to the Nationals once, in 1956, but had the misfortune to run into a pretty high-ranking player, Bob Perry, in the first round."

Twice A. T. A. Champion

Ryland, twice the American Tennis Association (Negro) champion, is 42 years old, with a slightly lined face and traces of a paunch. He's about 5 feet 9 inches tall and weighs 155 pounds. A sort of court rover, he has traveled lots of circuits since he first picked up a racquet in Chicago, his home city. And he has walked off with trophies against top competition, Negro and white, during his career.

Steady as a rock, with a powerful service, a fine backhand and a fluent net game, he built a reputation as a man to be reckoned with in any tournament—that is, any he could get into.

"I've loved tennis for as long as I can remember," Ryland said as he lined up the kids for a session on the backhand. "But I didn't win any worthwhile titles until late."



Bob Ryland

Meanwhile, he starred at Wayne University in Detroit and was lured to Tennessee A. and I. with a tennis scholarship. After he earned a Bachelor of Science degree, he got the post of physical director at the Montclair (N.J.) Y.M.C.A.

But Ryland lived for competition. He even took up table tennis, capturing the Canadian championship one year.

"I got pretty handy at that little game," he said.

At 42 He Continues Active in Sport as Player and Coach

It was the bigger game that counted most with him, however. He won the tough Detroit and Los Angeles city tennis championships and went to the final of the St. Louis city event, losing to Earl Buchholz, now a leading world pro.

On the Coast Ryland used to be sought as a practice partner by Pancho Gonzalez and other big-time players.

"There was a great Negro player out in California, a terrific hitter," he recalled. "His name is Jimmy McDaniel, and I'll always remember Don Budge and many others saying he belonged in the first 10. McDaniel's around 50 now and has taken up golf."

When his opportunities as an amateur began dwindling, Ryland weighed the situation and decided to become a pro. He joined the United States Professional Lawn Tennis Association, won a few more tournaments and made an exhibition tour with Jack Kramer's troupe, which included Bobby Riggs, Frank Parker and Frank Kovacs.

The Unanswerable Question

"Looking back over the years," Ryland said, "I'll always wonder if I could have made it big, with the right backing, like Althea Gibson or Arthur Ashe."

Then he smiled and said, "But I think I'm still hitting the ball pretty good."

When he isn't giving exhibitions, clinics and private lessons or playing in tournaments, Ryland devotes his time to teaching in the public parks.

"That's where the raw material is, not in the clubs," he said. "I've seen some great prospects in the parks, kids who, with the proper coaching and the breaks, could go a long way."

"Club tennis is okay to a point. But it's mostly social, for the lazy player and the lazy coach."