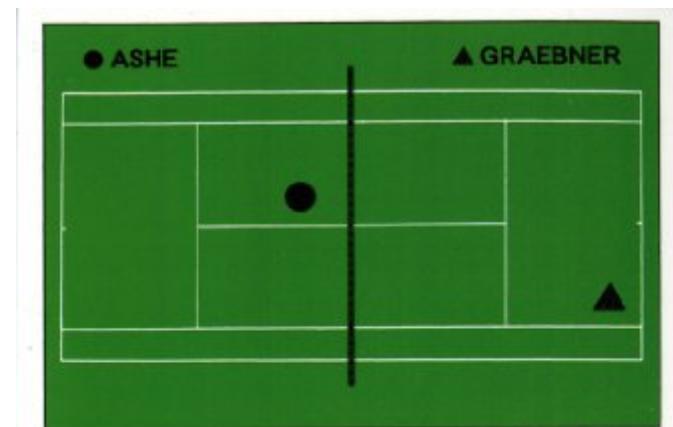


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Levels Of The Game



JOHN Levels of the Game McPHEE



Synopsis

This account of a tennis match played by Arthur Ashe against Clark Graebner at Forest Hills in 1968 begins with the ball rising into the air for the initial serve and ends with the final point. McPhee provides a brilliant, stroke-by-stroke description while examining the backgrounds and attitudes which have molded the players' games.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Ostensibly this book is about a tennis match, Arthur Ashe versus Clark Graebner in the 1968 US Open Semifinals. The match was historic in itself: "It has been thirteen years since an American won the men's-singles final at Forest Hills, and this match will determine whether Ashe or Graebner is to have a chance to be the first American since Tony Trabert to win it all. Ashe and Graebner are still amateurs, and it was imagined that in this tournament, playing against professionals, they wouldn't have much of a chance. But they are here, close to the finish, playing each other. For Graebner to look across a net and see Ashe--and the reverse--is not in itself unusual. They were both born in 1943, they have known each other since they were thirteen, and they have played tournaments and exhibitions and have practiced together in so many countries and seasons that details blur."But

McPhee is actually after bigger game than this one match. He also provides insightful portraits of the two very different contestants. Ashe, the only championship level Black tennis player of his time, is single, liberal, mercurial, a finesse player and a risk taker. Graebner is married with kids, conservative, religious, a power player and risk averse. McPhee demonstrates how their personalities influence, indeed shape, their play and how their lifelong rivalry lifts their games to higher levels when they play one another, ultimately lifting Ashe's game towards perfection by the end of this contest. Ashe would go on to win the tournament, becoming the only amateur to win it in the Open era and together Ashe and Graebner lead the US to its first Davis Cup in years. After that though, while Ashe went on to a respectable career, Graebner slipped into obscurity.

"Levels of the Game" is, on the surface, an account of a single match between Arthur Ashe and Clark Graebner in the semifinals at the U.S. Open in Forest Hills. But as the title suggests, a game --- any game, at any degree of competition --- is not just about competence. How you play is a revelation of character; how you play is who you are. It's on all the other levels that this is a great book --- one of the greatest you may ever read, period. First, because of the subject. Arthur Ashe was not the Jackie Robinson of tennis; when he emerged in the 1960s, he was the only African-American player of note in America. Clark Graebner was a dentist's son and a ringer for Clark Kent. As it happened, Ashe and Graebner were both best-of-breed. It's not inaccurate to say that they were friends. But you can't miss the notion that they are also archetypes: privileged white kid from Ohio vs. against-all-odds black kid from Virginia. In a mere 146 pages, John McPhee --- you know his byline from a zillion profiles in The New Yorker, many of them mesmerizing, some beyond dull, but all meticulously reported and more carved than written --- has pulled off a literary coup. He has written an account of the match that's thrilling sports reporting. After, he clearly interviewed Ashe and Graebner at length, for he recreates what they were thinking and feeling at every key point in the match. And then he goes still deeper, talking to parents and wives, coaches and mentors, so he can deliver acute biographies of each player and a revelatory portrait of a sport --- and a nation --- in transition. A mediocre writer would construct this book with long passages in italics. Or chapters that pull us out of the match and take us back to Virginia or Ohio.

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