

Althea Gibson

Althea Gibson's story is an inspiring one because she truly overcame barriers and succeeded in a day when black women weren't gracing the covers of Sports Illustrated. She was a pioneer in athletics yet most people who don't follow sports were unaware of her, or her many accomplishments. Althea was the first black woman to win the US championship and Wimbledon and become the first black woman tennis champion of the world. When Venus and Serena Williams weren't even a twinkle in their father's eye, she was breaking the color barrier in US professional tennis. It would be more than 30 years after her last Wimbledon championship that another black woman, Zina Garrison would even reach the finals. But Althea did even more.

Althea Gibson was born in 1927 in Silver, South Carolina. She grew up in Harlem, New York, though and practiced hitting rubber balls off of a brick wall as a child. Her tennis coach was a one-armed man, named Fred Johnson. He taught her to play the game. Boxer Sugar Ray Leonard paid her travel expenses and she won her first tournament at the age of 15. She was the New York State black girls' tennis champion. She spent her high school years in Wilmington, NC, where Dr. R.W. Johnson and his family took her into their home and Dr. E.A. Eaton coached her. He taught her grace and dignity--qualities she would need to play professional tennis. In those days, tennis was a game for ladies and gentlemen and Althea learned to conduct herself in that manner. It would be her trademark until the day she died. She attended Florida A&M on tennis and basketball scholarships.

Althea ascended the ranks of the American Tennis Association (founded in 1916 for black players). In 1948 she won the first of 10 straight national black women's singles championships. She became the first black to play in the National Grass Court Tennis Championships (which later became the US Open) and nearly defeated Wimbledon Champion Louise Brough. The next year, though, she broke the racial barrier and entered Wimbledon. Her first time ended in defeat. It was a difficult blow for her to overcome, but her coach talked her into sticking with it. He knew a champion when he saw one. A year later she toured for the US State Department and won several championships, including her first Women's doubles championship at Wimbledon. In 1957, though, she reached her goal when she became the champion of both Wimbledon and the US Grass Courts Tennis Championships.

Gibson was the Associated Press' Female Athlete of the Year in 1957 and 1958. She retired soon after and gave up the game. In those days, major tournaments didn't pay much money and there were very few endorsement packages for athletes, let alone female or black athletes. Former New York Mayor David Dinkins said, "If she had been a half-step later in the game (of tennis), she would have become a multi-millionaire." She flirted briefly with a singing career, then signed a lucrative deal to play exhibition tennis matches preceding Harlem Globetrotters games. She took up golf in 1960 and became the first black woman on the PGA Tour in '62. She never won a golf tournament and earned only a little money.

Althea was inducted into numerous Halls of Fame, including the International Tennis Hall of Fame. She served as New Jersey State Commissioner of Athletics from 1975-85, then on the state control board until 1988 and the governor's council on physical fitness until 1992. In her later years she suffered physical problems and financial declines. She kept it private, not wanting to burden anyone, but when word got out that she needed help, her friends and admirers came to her aide. Money came in from all over the world as a tribute to her popularity and fame.

She died in September, 2003 at age 76 without physical children, but a host of athletes and champions who admired her grace and dignity. She had influenced many people worldwide. Venus Williams spoke of Althea when she won her first Wimbledon title in 2000 (and the first by a black woman since Althea in '58). Venus reflected, "It had to be hard because people were unable to see past color." Mariaan de Swardt, a ranked South African tennis player wrote, "I focused on your game when I learned how to play, and I wanted to thank you."

Perhaps the most fitting tribute came from legendary tennis great Martina Navratilova. Martina said, "She was a great champion and great person. She was always there for me even when I was a nobody." Her life was very difficult, but she broke down a lot of barriers and doors and made it easier for a lot of us."

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