

First black Olympic champion, Alice Coachman: The little girl from the red hills of Georgia

By Stephen L. Harris

In 1996, the United States Olympic Committee (USOC) honored America's greatest living Olympic champions as part of the centennial of the modern Olympic Games. The USOC, in collaboration with Xerox Corporation, published my book, "100 Golden Olympians." Among the champions, I was most honored to interview and write the story of Alice Coachman, the first black woman to capture a gold medal, who died in 2014 at age 90.

In baseball parlance, Olympic high jumper Coachman had, in the 1948 London Games, two strikes against her in the bottom of the ninth inning with two outs, and it certainly looked like the third and final strike was on its way.

The first strike was that Coachman was an African American woman. No black woman had ever won an Olympic gold medal. In fact, in the 1948 Games, no American women had yet won a track or field event, and the United States was down to its last chance. The second strike was a formidable field that included Great Britain's Dorothy Tyler, a 28-year-old who in 1936 had been robbed of the gold medal and was anxious to win what she thought was rightfully hers; and France's powerful, multi-talented Micheline Ostermeyer, already the winner of the discus and shot put. The potential third strike was a severe injury that had forced Coachman out of the sprints and threatened to keep her from performing at her best.

With 85,000 people crammed into London's Wembley Stadium, the odds of winning seemed a long shot for a country girl who had first started jumping in her bare feet.

Alice Coachman was born Nov. 9, 1923, in Albany, Ga. Her father, Fred "Doc" Coachman, was a hard disciplinarian who handed out whippings when his children were disobedient. "Papa didn't want me to be an athlete," Alice said. "He thought I'd break my neck."

But she loved "running, skipping and jumping," and the moment her household chores were done, she slipped out the back door in her bare feet, jumped a four-foot-high wire fence and raced to the playground to compete against the boys.

"I got a lot of whippings because I ran off without asking," she said. "Papa wanted his girls sitting on the porch when the sun went down."

When she was 16, Coachman competed in the 1939 Tuskegee Relays, a track meet for African Americans that was similar in those days to the Penn Relays. The meet was divided into high school and college competitions. Wearing tennis shoes for the first time, Coachman won both competitions in the high jump. "I would have rather jumped without the tennis shoes," she said. "They felt funny and were too tight."

Coachman then took part in the national championships in Connecticut. It was a long trip for a county girl and she was terribly excited. But she won, and for the next 10 years captured every national Amateur Athletic Union (AAU) high jump championship.

From 1942 to 1948, she won three 100-yard-dash titles. She also was a two-time AAU indoor sprint champion. At Tuskegee Institute, she ran track, starred on the basketball team, marched in the drill corps, sang in the choir and worked to help pay for her room and board.

“I loved the choir so much,” she said, “that sometimes I would miss my dinner because practice started at six o’clock every night.”

World War II cancelled the Olympic Games in 1940 and 1944. When they resumed in 1948, Coachman was 25 years old. During the Olympic Trials, she withdrew from the sprints because she suffered from a painful twisted ovary. Unable to practice as hard as she wanted, she still qualified for the U.S. Team. On the voyage to England, she cried. “I didn’t want to go to the Olympics. I really wanted to stay home.”

For the U.S. women, the track events proved disastrous. Only Audrey Patterson collected a medal, placing third in the 200 meters.

On the day before the high jump, Coachman did not practice. Her coach was upset. She fretted that Coachman would end up losing like all the other American women. As Coachman headed onto the field, with 85,000 people cheering in the stands, her coach hurried out of the stadium, unable to watch what she felt was a disaster in the making.

But Coachman “wasn’t afraid or nervous. I just said, ‘Lordy, if it’s your will, let it be done.’”

As always, she enjoyed herself – not even knowing that she had won. In fact, she and Tyler had tied at 5-6, but because Coachman had fewer misses, she was declared the winner. It was the only gold medal for the U.S. women in 1948 – and the first ever by a black woman in Olympic history.

Back home, Coachman was honored with a 175-mile motorcade where blacks and whites alike cheered. In 1952, Coca-Cola then honored her by making her the first black female athlete to endorse an international consumer product.

In London, after she had won the high jump, King George VI gave her the gold medal she had earned. Recalled a thrilled Coachman, “I had won 10 American championships before the Olympics, and here was the King of England presenting the Olympic gold medal to me, a little girl from the red hills of Georgia.”

Stephen L. Harris is the author of an award-winning trilogy about New York City’s National Guard regiments in World War I, including *Harlem’s Hell Fighters: The African-American 369th Infantry in World War I*.