

Alice Coachman

From hard times to great heights

1923 - 2014

Athlete

Champion

Trailblazer

Lessons
for
Grade
School



Early Life

The 1920's to 30's in Georgia was a period marked by suffering.

In the 1920's, the boll weevil, a type of beetle, destroyed much of the cotton crops in the South. At that time, cotton was the main source of income for many in the South. Life became harder when the Great Depression of the 1930's forced most **sharecroppers**, many of whom were Black, into poverty.

It was during these hard times that Alice Marie Coachman was born in Albany, Georgia, on November 9, 1923. She was one of ten children born to Fred and Evelyn Coachman.

Major events like wars, economic hardship or prosperity can have a big impact on someone's childhood. What are the events that are shaping your generation?



Irrepressible Talent

From childhood, Alice had a passion and talent for athletics. Alice loved to run and play sports with the boys in her neighborhood, but when her father caught her doing these things, he would punish her because he did not feel it was proper for girls to act that way. Still, against her parent's wishes, Coachman practiced in secret.

“Back then,” she told William C. Rhoden of the New York Times in 1995, “there was the sense that women weren't supposed to be running like that. My father wanted his girls to be dainty, sitting on the front porch.”

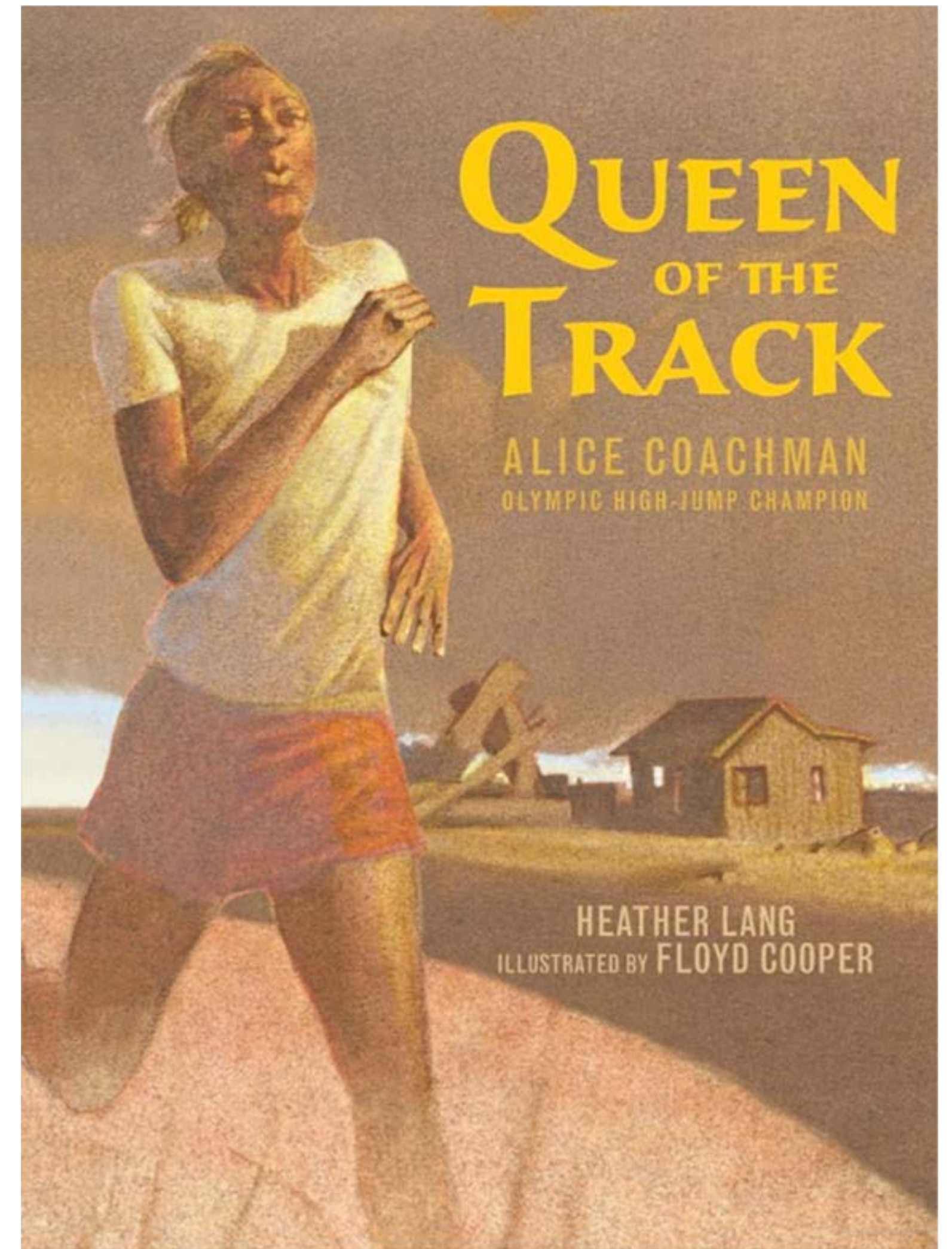


Image from the book *Queen of the Track: Alice Coachman, Olympic High-Jump Champion*, written by Heather Lang and illustrated by Floyd Cooper.

Overcoming barriers...

Coachman not only faced obstacles based on her gender, but also faced a **hostile** racial environment. For example, because of strict **segregation** laws, young athletes of color in southern schools could not use public training facilities or attend organized sports events.

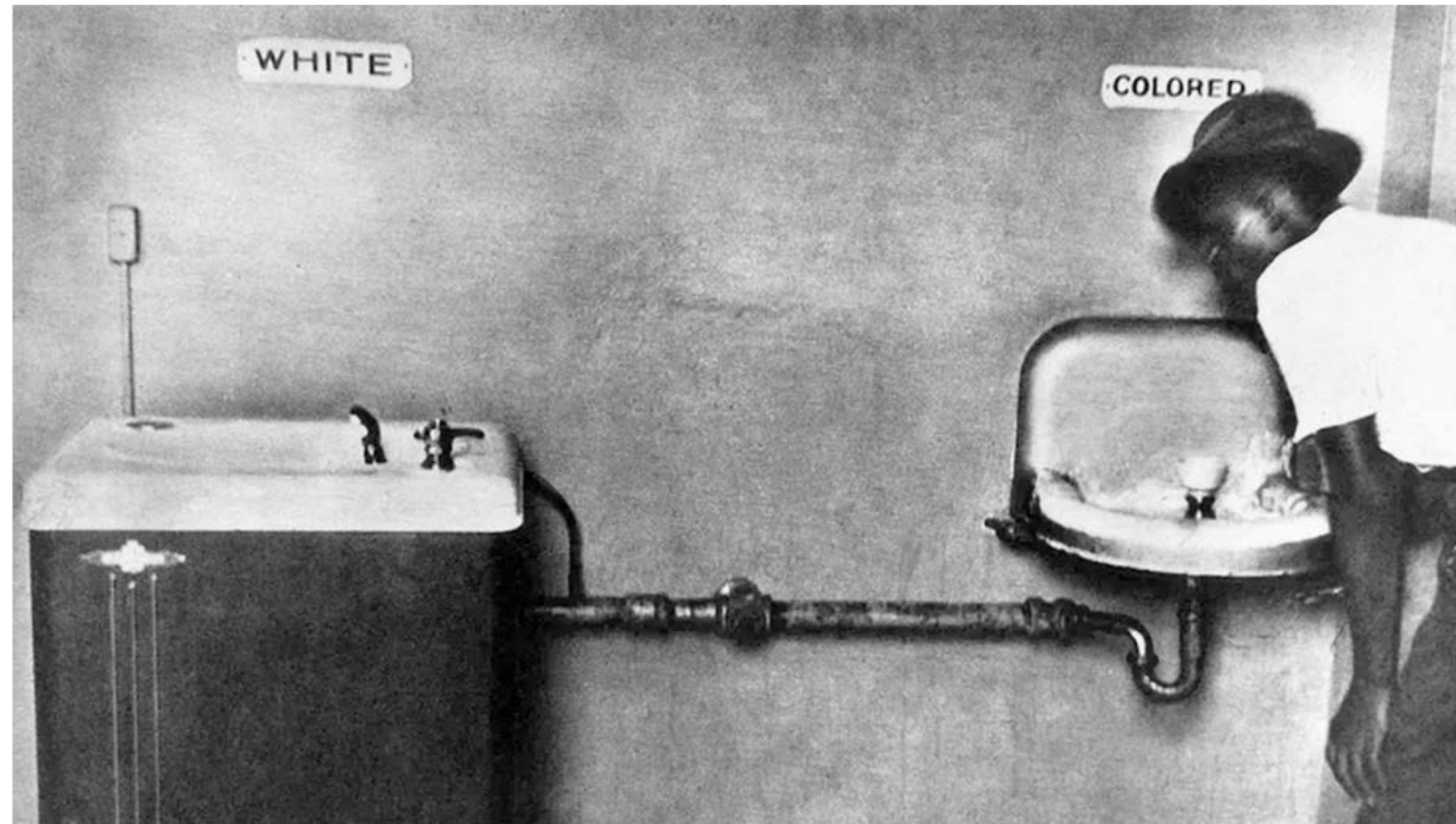


Photo of a young man drinking from a segregated water fountain in North Carolina, 1938.

... and opening new doors

Despite these barriers, Coachman continued to develop her athletic skills. She would run barefoot on the dirt roads near her house. Coachman was also **resourceful**, as she would practice for hours, jumping over a crossbar made of rags tied together.

Have you ever faced difficulty doing something because of your race, age, gender or background? Have you ever had to improvise like Alice Coachman did to improve her skills?



Image from the book *Touch the Sky: Alice Coachman, Olympic High Jumper*, written by Ann Malaspina and illustrated by Eric Velasquez.

Dedicated helpers

Coachman didn't overcome the odds all on her own. She had several people who spoke up for her. It was people like Cora Bailey, her fifth-grade teacher, and her aunt, Carrie Spry, who convinced Coachman's parents to let her pursue her athletic career.

In 1938, Harry E. Lash, Madison High School's track coach, helped develop and refine Coachman's raw talent.



What are some ways a coach or mentor can help you achieve your goals?

Smashing records without shoes!



Image courtesy of Shutterstock.

In 1939, in the summer before her first official semester in college, Coachman entered the Women's National Championships and broke both the **collegiate** and national high jump records. What made this victory more impressive is that Coachman did all her events barefoot!

On to college

At just age 16, Coachman accepted a scholarship and transferred to the Tuskegee Institute, where she began to gain national recognition for her athletic ability.

Under the leadership of its first president, Booker T. Washington (1881-1915), the Tuskegee Institute (now Tuskegee University) became one of the most influential institutions now referred to as “Historically Black Colleges and Universities” (HBCUs).

HBCUs are colleges and universities that were established with a focus on serving the African-American community. Most of these schools were founded after the Civil War and are concentrated in the southern United States.



A great coach at Tuskegee Institute



At Tuskegee Institute, Alice was coached by the legendary Cleveland “Cleve” Abbott, who was hired by Booker T. Washington to become both a classroom teacher and director of the Tuskegee athletics program in 1915.

Abbott had a huge influence on Coachman and the school’s overall success. In his 32-year career, the Tuskegee football team won nine national titles and went 203-96; in women’s track, Tuskegee won 14 national championships and a half dozen competed in the Olympics. Today, he is widely remembered as a **pioneer** in developing women’s track and field in the USA.

Multi-sport national champion

Under Abbott's guidance, Coachman would go on to win the Amateur Athletic Union (AAU) high jump championship eight **consecutive** times (1939 to 1946), and AAU's 50-meter dash four consecutive times (1943 to 1946). She also won national championships in the 100-meter dash and the 4x100-meter relay.

Alice was a **multi-talented** athlete. In addition to running track, she was a member of the three-time national champion Tuskegee Women's basketball team.



Alice Coachman is on the far right in this photo with the Tuskegee relay team.

Multi-sport national champion

After graduating from Tuskegee in 1946 , Alice enrolled at Albany State College to further her education.

She continued to compete at a high level and won both the AAU high jump championship and the 50-meter dash in 1946-1947. In total, Alice held 25 national titles, cementing her status as a college track legend.

What does it mean to be a “legend” in sports?
Who are some current or recent sports legends?

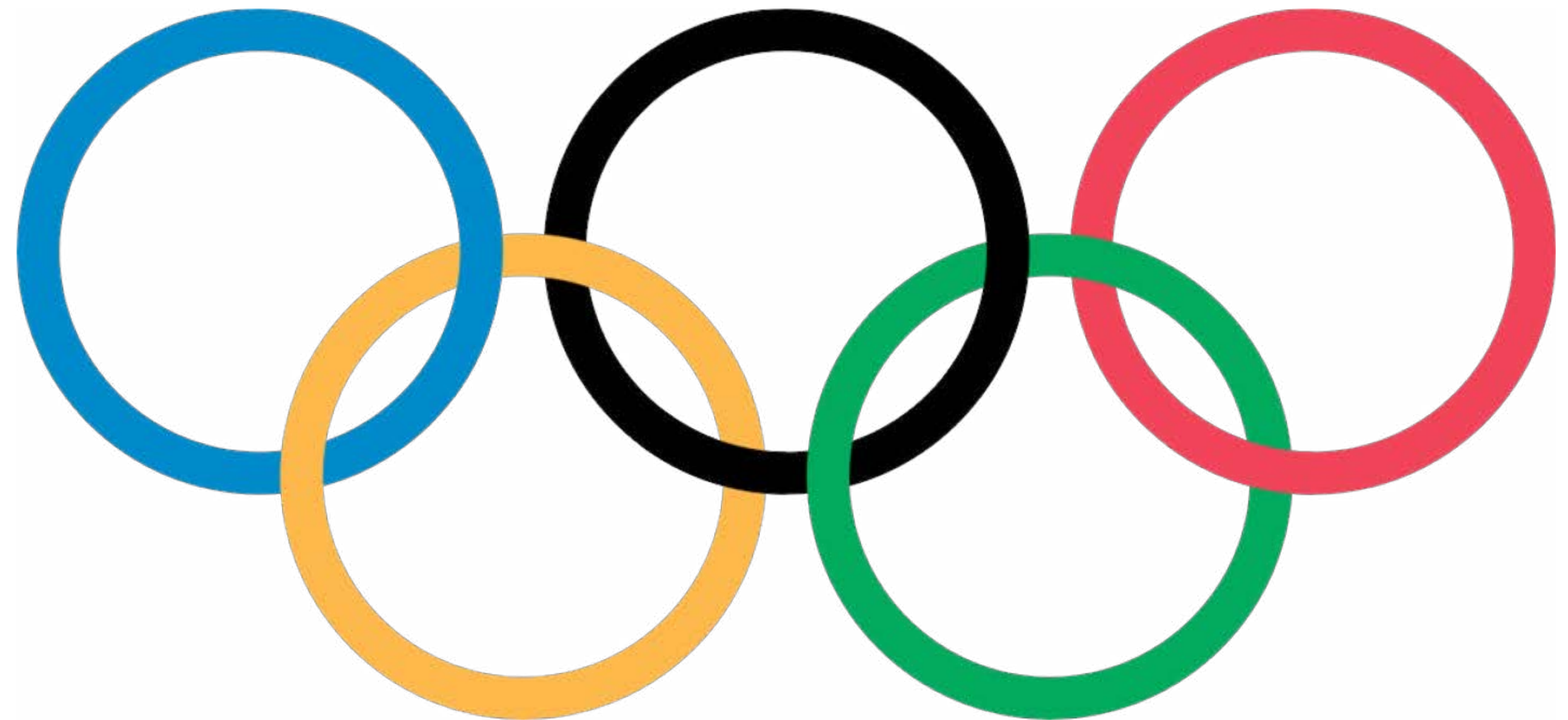


Ready for the Olympics — on the world stage

You probably know that the Olympics
are held every four years.

Did you know that there were no
Olympics held in 1940 or 1944?

Can you guess why?

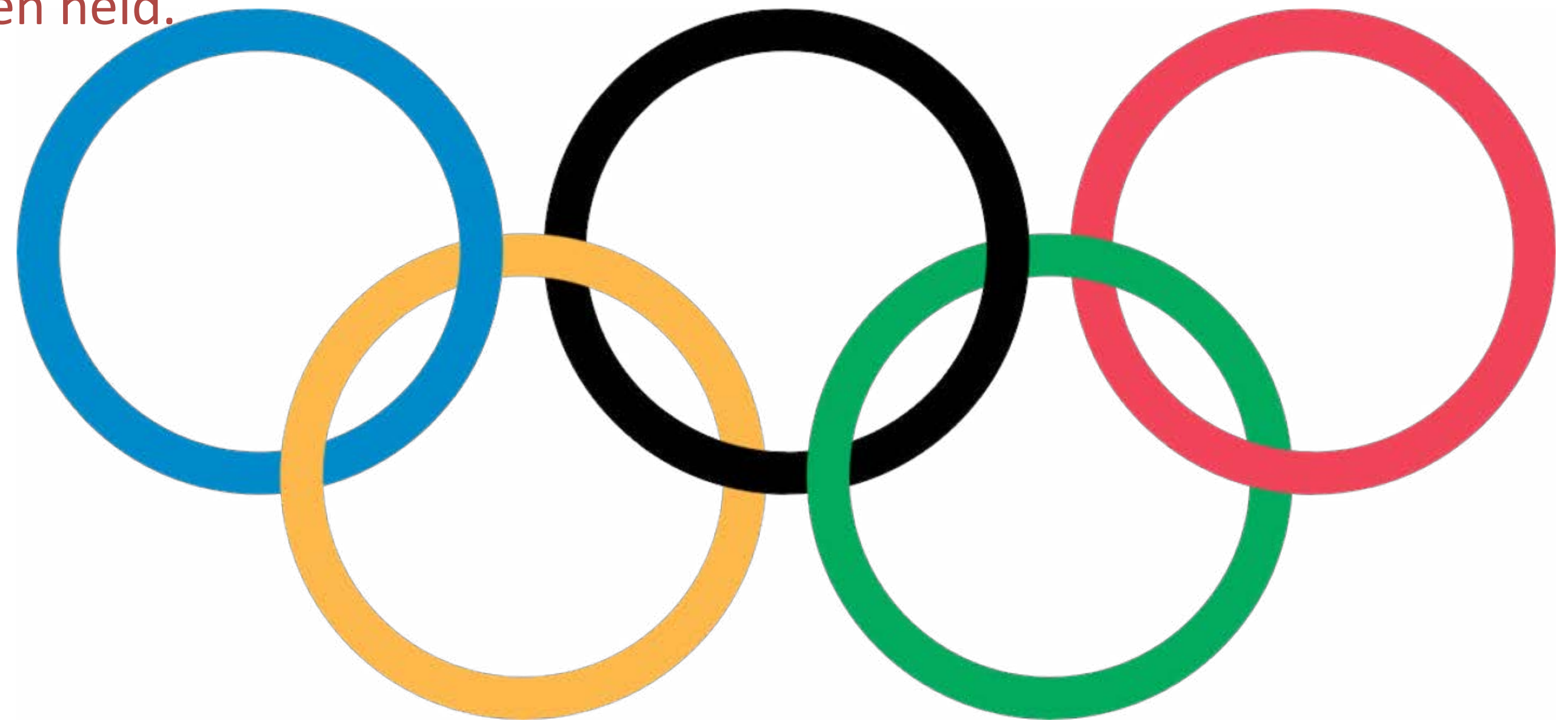


Ready for the Olympics — on the world stage

The Olympics were cancelled in those years due to World War II. They were supposed to be held in Tokyo, Japan (in 1940) and London, England (in 1944).

It is quite likely Coachman would have placed in the 1940 and 1944 Olympics, had they been held.

They were also cancelled in 1916 in Berlin, Germany during World War I and were **postponed** in 2020, again in Tokyo, due to the CoViD-19 pandemic.



FINALLY: The 1948 Olympics!

This meant that Alice missed not just one, but TWO opportunities to showcase her talent and receive well-deserved recognition. But she didn't give up.

It was only in 1948 that Coachman was finally able to compete in the high jump and establish herself as one of best athletes in the world.

Because the world was recovering from the devastation of World War II, the 1948 London Olympiad was known as the “**Austerity** Games.” It was also the first Olympics to broadcast events on television. Most were excited just to come together and to move past dark times.

Coachman had to stay in shape while she waited for her chance to compete. Sometimes it can take a while for you to have the opportunity to show what you can do, but you have to stay prepared!



The 1948 Olympics

There was immense pressure on Alice Coachman to deliver a medal.

Her preparation method was unusual.

She explained: *“I don’t work out the day before a meet ... I was talking to the man above, telling him, ‘If it’s your will, let it be done.’ ”* Coachman also prepared by sucking a lemon rather than drinking water, saying later: *“It helped me when my mouth was dry. I liked to feel light so I didn’t drink water in competition.”*

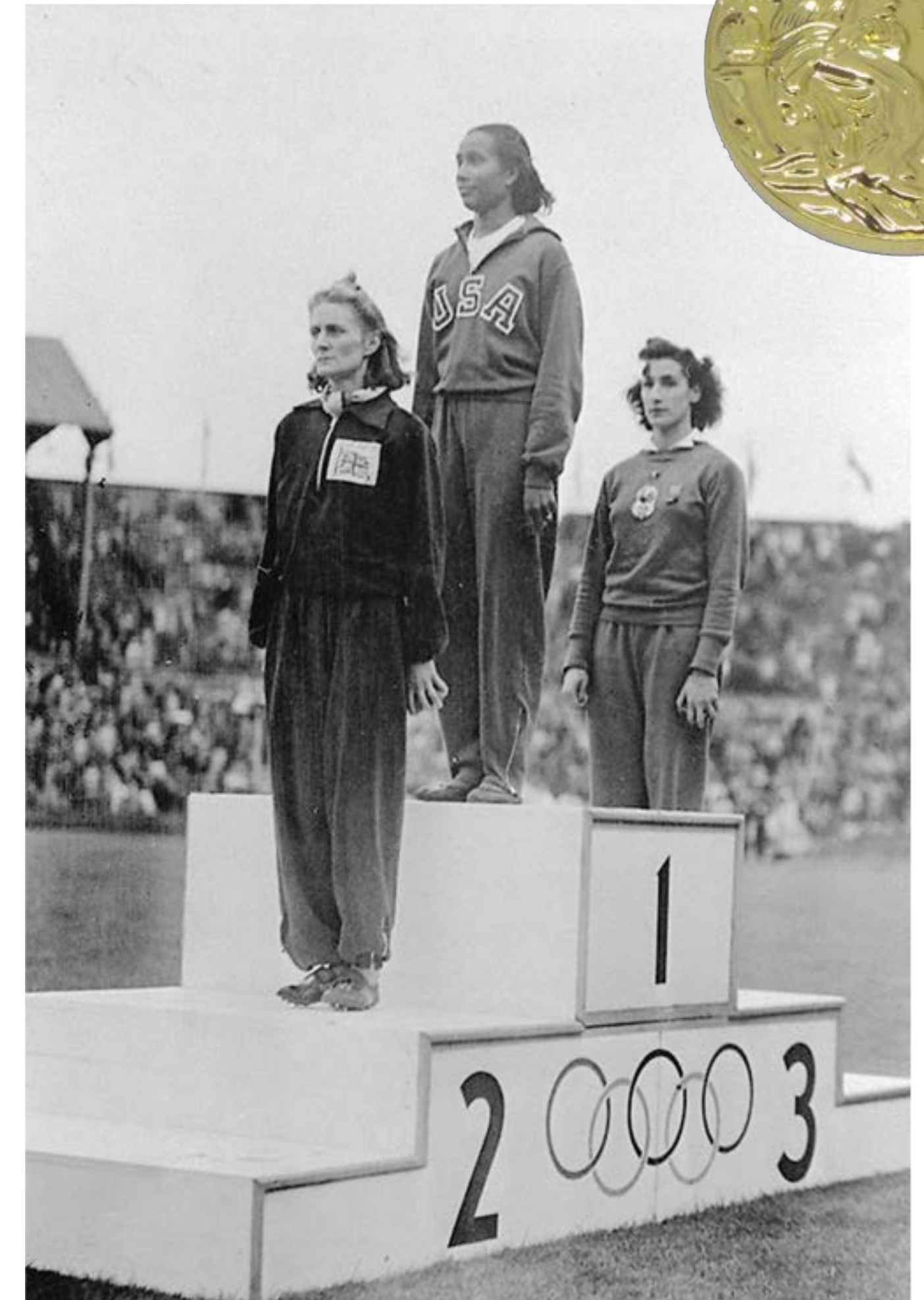


Olympic Champion

The high jump competition was very close, as both Dorothy Tyler of Britain and Coachman cleared 5 feet 6 ½ inches.

However, because Coachman cleared her distance on her first try while Tyler cleared it only on her second, Coachman won the tie-breaker and was declared winner.

This achievement made Alice Coachman ***the first black woman in the world to win the Olympic gold medal.***



Olympic Champion

Coachman was one of many Olympic athletes of color to be welcomed at The White House by President Harry S. Truman.

What is your favorite Olympic sport?



President Harry S. Truman stands with a group of African-American Olympic athletes in the Oval Office in 1948. Alice Coachman is second from the right.

Olympic Champion

However, even at the celebration for her victory back home in Georgia, she was faced with the racism that was very common at the time. The Sunday Times reported in 2012:

“When [Coachman] reached Atlanta in Georgia she was welcomed along the roads stretching almost 180 miles to Albany, where a civic celebration was held. She was congratulated by the mayor, but he did not shake her hand. Neither did she speak publicly.”

Coachman recalled many years later:
“That was the way it was in 1948.”



After the Olympics

Alice returned to Albany State College to finish her degree, graduating in 1949.

In 1952, Coachman became the first African-American woman to earn an **endorsement** deal as she partnered with Coca-Cola to become a spokesperson!



After the Olympics

At the 1996 Summer Olympic Games in Atlanta, Coachman was honored as one of the 100 greatest Olympians in history.

She's also been inducted into nine different Halls of Fame, including the National Track & Field Hall of Fame (1975) and the U.S. Olympic Hall of Fame (2004).

Have you ever visited a Hall of Fame for your favorite sport? If your community, school or family had a Hall of Fame, who do you think would be in it?



Paving the path for others

Although Coachman lived a quiet, humble life out of the spotlight after her athletic career, she continued to leave a legacy in women's sports and the wider world of Track & Field.

Alice Coachman was a **trailblazer** who led the way for future African-American and female athletes. She created the Alice Coachman Track and Field Foundation to aid young athletes and former competitors in financial need.



Alice once said: *"I have always believed that I could do whatever I set my mind to do."*

Vocabulary

Sharecropper

Hostile

Segregation

Resourceful

Prowess

Resourceful

Collegiate

Pioneer

Consecutive

Multi-talented

Postponed

Austerity

Endorsement

Trailblazer

