
“The Tuskegee Flash” and “the Slender Harlem Stroker”: Black Women Athletes on the Margin

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In July 1948, as track and field athlete Alice Coachman was arriving in London to represent the United States in the Olympic high-jump competition, the *Chicago Defender* ran a story in its sports section featuring Coachman and the U.S. women’s track and field team. Entitled “Rush Carver Peanut Oil to Olympic Team Gals,” sportswriter Russ Cowans described how the prized peanut oil, long used by track and field powerhouse Tuskegee Institute as a rubbing liniment, had been left behind in the United States. “It was Miss Coachman who sent the coaches and trainers into a dither,” wrote Cowans. ‘A day out of New York, Miss Coachman discovered that the peanut rubbing oil was not in the luggage, although Coach Cleve Abbott of Tuskegee had promised to have some in New York for the gals to take to London.’ The article continued by reporting how Olympic Coach Harry Hainsworth wired Abbott to send the oil over as quickly as possible. “Miss Coachman and the girls from Tuskegee have talked so much about the benefits they’ve derived from the oil ... that all the girls want to use it,” commented Coach Hainsworth.¹

Coachman went on to win the gold, the first African American woman to win the prized medal, and the *Defender* and other black weeklies celebrated her victory and achievement. However, despite what one scholar has labeled our own culture’s “sports fixation,”

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Coachman's achievement and those of many other female African American athletes are all but forgotten today.² Even a historical field full of vitality and growth has not helped rescue these women from general obscurity.³ Why are female African American athletes neglected to the point that they and their achievements have been essentially forgotten? This study suggests that sources for news in the 1940s and 1950s contributed to the loss of at least two black women athletes from the public memory—1940s track star Alice Coachman and 1950s tennis great Althea Gibson. In short, by focusing primarily on race or gender rather than athletic talent, the white and black press constructed public identities for Coachman and Gibson that marginalized them as athletes.

It was not necessarily a lack of press coverage of black female athletes that led to their marginalization, although this was certainly a contributing factor in the case of Alice Coachman. Often more harmful was the type of coverage suggested by the aforementioned "peanut oil" article. The story suggests a certain vibrancy surrounding the coverage, but it also reveals a tendency to neglect the skills of the athletes and identify them in nonathletic terms. The lighthearted tone of the article and the reference to the athletes as "the gals" suggests that they were to be indulged but not taken too seriously. Indeed, contemporary sportswriters routinely constructed Coachman's and Gibson's identities along race or gender lines, leaving their athletic prowess to be inferred from their accomplishments.

While the white and black press differed in the ways they presented these two women, neither treatment proved beneficial in securing their athletic place in history. In the white press, gender became the essential element around which their careers were interpreted. This is not to say that race was never a factor, but it was generally secondary to gender. This construction worked to Alice Coachman's detriment. As a female track and field athlete, she received little coverage from the white press mainly because she participated in a male-gendered sport. Not usually isolated for being African American, she nonetheless existed on the margin in white news accounts for being a woman competing in a "man's sport." On the other hand, Althea Gibson excelled in a sport in which women's participation had long been sanctioned. As a result, she enjoyed considerably more coverage through the construction of her by the white press as a female athlete. However, she also suffered from this emphasis on gender when the public began to *perceive* her tennis playing as too masculine.

Whereas the presentation of Coachman and Gibson in the white press revolved primarily around gender, race became the focal point for constructing their identities in the black press. This latter construction led to more press for Alice Coachman than she received in white papers as black sportswriters highlighted her achievements in terms of her status as an African American. However, the black press was aware of the unpopularity of track and field for women in the 1940s and their efforts to introduce gender into news accounts with the purpose of feminizing Coachman often had the effect of trivializing her athletic talent. Althea Gibson suffered in more explicit ways from this racial construction of her identity and athletic career. Initially celebrated by the black press for her achievement in breaking down the color line in the elite world of tennis, black sportswriters eventually turned on her for her refusal to assume the role of a race hero in the vein of Jackie Robinson.

The choice of Alice Coachman and Althea Gibson grants important insights into not only change over time but also the gender and class distinctions associated with track and

field versus tennis. During Coachman's career, the sport of track and field remained a decidedly masculine endeavor. While women first began competing in the 1920s and initially enjoyed popularity, physical education leaders soon began criticizing female participation in the sport, positing that the jarring movements required by track events put too much strain on the female anatomy. Furthermore, experts also expressed concern that the "masculinizing effects" of such activity would make women unfit for their feminine roles, particularly that of motherhood. As a result, participation by white women declined, and many talented African American female track athletes emerged to take advantage of the exodus. Some white women continued to flock to the sport in the 1930s and 1940s, such as Babe Didrickson, Helen Stephens, and Stella Walsh. However, their working class backgrounds and "mannish" appearances upset the middle-class sensibilities of physical education instructors, pushing women's track and field even further to the margins of white society.⁴

The arena of track and field did not necessarily carry with it the same set of unattractive qualities for black women as it did for most white women. On the contrary, the elements of survival, even victory, in the face of adversity and struggle fit nicely into the African American woman's concept of ideal womanhood. Generally barred from the exclusive role of full-time mother, black women out of necessity assumed the multiple roles of wage earner, mother, homemaker, and community activist. African American femininity, therefore, was not constructed through limited attributes set in opposition to masculinity. Rather, ideal black womanhood was imbued with the positive qualities of strength, morality, and family and community commitments that had been forged through difficult circumstances as well as through the respect accorded them in the successful assumption of these different roles.⁵

The prowess of African American women in track and field during the 1930s and 1940s could be a double-edged sword, however. Most of the athletes enjoyed personal opportunities beyond what many of their race and gender would otherwise experience, such as the excitement of competition and educational and travel opportunities. Furthermore, their achievements served as a symbol of pride for their African American community. However, the success came at a price. White America often neglected them or, perhaps worse, perpetuated the negative stereotype of the black "mannish" woman, naturally suited to the role of athlete.⁶

While Coachman excelled in a sport that was considered unladylike and inappropriate for women, Gibson's story was altogether different. Tennis, a sport more associated with feminine qualities, had long accepted women. Though more inclusive of women than track and field, it was not, however, more inclusive of race. Not until 1948 did the first African American play in a major United States Lawn Tennis Association (USLTA) tournament. Furthermore, the class issues associated with tennis were perhaps even more rigid than that of track and field. Developed as a sport of the elite, tennis did not openly welcome working class participants.⁷

The choice of Coachman and Gibson also introduces the contrast of individuals raised in different regions of the country. Coachman was born and educated in the Jim Crow society of the Deep South so that "separate but equal" was an entrenched way of life for this Albany, Georgia, native. Although Gibson was educated in North Carolina and Florida,

she spent her formative years in Harlem. While New York was not immune to racism, Gibson noted the difference as she journeyed in the South at the age of nineteen. Confronting the “White in front, Colored in rear” sign on her first bus ride in downtown Wilmington, North Carolina, she remembered, “It disgusted me, and it made me feel ashamed in a way I’d never been ashamed back in New York.”⁸

The sports in which they competed, the regions of the country in which they lived, and even the decades in which they forged their careers mark important differences in Coachman’s and Gibson’s lives. Despite these differences, the ways in which the press constructed the public identities of these athletes were remarkably similar. Choosing to emphasize either gender or race over athletic skill and hard work, both black and white sports journalists unknowingly contributed to confining these women to the historical margin.

“The Tuskegee Flash”

From 1937 to 1948, the women’s track and field team of Tuskegee Institute dominated the Amateur Athletic Union (AAU) outdoor championships, winning every year but 1943, when they placed second to the Cleveland Olympic Club. While numerous talented African American women competed under their banner, Alice Coachman ranks among the top. Eventually referred to in the black press as the “Tuskegee flash” for her sprinting prowess, Coachman caught the attention of the Tuskegee Institute coaching staff during the late 1930s and first competed for them the summer before beginning high school classes there. During her nine years of competition, first at Tuskegee and later at Albany State College, she forged a career that stands unrivaled in the record books. From 1939 when she burst on the scene by winning the high jump at the AAU outdoor women’s championship, she dominated her events by amassing twenty-six national championships, more than any other American woman with the exception of her Polish-American rival, Stella Walsh.⁹

Yet, within the white press, Coachman was seldom portrayed as a record-breaking track star. In fact, women track athletes in general suffered from the portrayal of them in the white press, which generally emphasized gender over either race or athletic prowess. In Coachman’s nine-year career, the limited coverage granted female track and field athletes by white newspapers and magazines is startling. Rarely did photographs of the athletes accompany the short articles that reported the national AAU outdoor championships, whereas male track and field events routinely received one- and two-page spreads, complete with pictures.¹⁰

At no time does the neglect of women’s track and field stand out more than during coverage of the 1948 Summer Olympic Games in London.¹¹ Indeed, track and field was synonymous with masculinity, and the men’s events in this sport completely dominated the white press coverage. Regardless of whether male track and field athletes were white or African American, they received not only extensive article coverage with accompanying photographs but also analysis by contemporary sports journalists. However, not even the very complete Olympic coverage by the *New York Times* included any pictures of American female track and field athletes. This is replicated by the *Times*’ counterparts in other U.S. cities such as the *Chicago Tribune*, the *Boston Globe*, and the *Atlanta Constitution*.¹²



Alice Coachman, champion sprinter and high jumper, anchored the Tuskegee Women's Track and Field Team during the 1940s. In 1948, she became the first African American woman to win Olympic gold. *Courtesy Tuskegee University Archives.*

In part, the lack of coverage of American women's track and field during the 1948 Olympics may have resulted from their disappointing performances. Most of the American women failed to make it to the finals, and only Coachman and sprinter Audrey Patterson placed in their events.¹³ Furthermore, the performance of Dutch runner Fanny Blankers-Koen tended to dominate the games. Her four gold track medals earned her the honor of being photographed by the American white press. However, in spite of Blankers-Koen's record-breaking Olympics, white sportswriters constructed her identity predominantly through gender. Journalists routinely referred to her as "the Dutch housewife" and "the blond, slender, 30-year-old mother of two," as opposed to confining their reports to her sprinting prowess. These descriptions served to feminize the Dutch athlete, necessary since she competed in a supposedly masculine sport.¹⁴

Although coverage of women track champions, regardless of race, paled in comparison to that of the men, the attention Coachman received was generally commensurate

with her white female competitors. Indeed, one of the compelling things about Coachman's white press coverage is how remarkably like her white competitors' it is. As early in her career as 1942, when she began to take home multiple titles at the AAU Women's Outdoor Nationals, Coachman was mentioned by white papers, and the Tuskegee team even took the headline that year in the *Chicago Tribune*—"Tuskegee Wins 6th Women's AAU Title in Track." By 1945 and 1946, when Coachman was at the peak of her career, she began to make headlines when the *Boston Globe* reported "Tuskegee Girl Eclipses Stella in Title Meet," and the *New York Times* reported her being awarded three places on the All-American Track and Field Team with a headline in the sports section.¹⁵ The white press routinely referred to Coachman as the "star sprinter," the "Tuskegee star," or the "Tuskegee flash" in ways not only similar to the black press but also quite similar to its own references to white female track and field athletes.¹⁶

To subordinate race to gender was not to ignore it, however. While Coachman was often depicted in terms similar to white women track athletes, race did at times play a factor. Indeed, the coverage by the *New York Times* illustrates the role of race. The *Times* not only photographed Fanny Blankers-Koen but also gave her more article coverage than any member of the U.S. women's track team. Incredibly, from August 8 when Coachman won her gold to August 15 when the *Times* wrapped up its reporting, it granted Alice Coachman—the only American woman to win a gold in track and field, the first African American, and a new Olympic record holder—just one sentence. Its startling lack of coverage of Coachman's athletic achievement reveals that second to gender came race. Athletic competence was of little significance.¹⁷

Moreover, the Olympics were not the first time the white paper had slighted Coachman. When she became a triple winner at the 1945 AAU Women's Nationals, finally beating out Stella Walsh in the 100-meter dash after coming close the previous two years, the *Times* completely ignored the Tuskegee star's achievement. The short three-paragraph article entitled "Miss Walsh Wins Easily" covered Walsh's single win in the 200-meter despite the fact that Coachman took the title in the 50-meter, the 100-meter, and the high jump. And in 1946, while Coachman dominated both the AAU Women's Nationals as well as the *Times's* coverage of it by retaining all three of her titles, the one photograph accompanying the article was of the white 80-meter hurdles champion, Nancy Cowperthwaite.¹⁸

Even when her home state overlooked gender in order to honor one of its own as a new Olympic record holder, Coachman's race came before her athletic achievement. "Albany Negress is Olympic Champ: Alice Coachman Wins High Jump," headlined the *Atlanta Constitution* in an article devoted entirely to the newest native Georgia champion. For a white paper in the Deep South in 1948, the article unexpectedly celebrates Coachman's achievement, reporting that there were over 70,000 on hand to watch Coachman set a new Olympic record, the "greatest [crowd] ever to witness a high jump exhibition." However, in addition to the several overt references to her race, the account also contains subtle messages of race and gender: "An all-around athlete, Alice is an outstanding forward on the basketball team at college, but her instructors say confidentially that she's 'just a fair student' in home economics."¹⁹ The article hints at two negative stereotypes—that of the African American who excels athletically but not academically and of the woman who

participates in a mannish sport because she is not “feminine” enough to do well in the female college course of home economics.

While the white press offered limited coverage of Alice Coachman’s athletic prowess, the black press heralded her achievements, as well as those of other black female track stars. Constructing her identity primarily through race rather than gender, African American journalists overlooked the gender concerns of their white counterparts. Indeed, black weeklies often gave the Tuskegee team and Coachman headlines in the sports page, accompanied by team photos or individual shots of the athletes in action. As early as 1941, before she had become a dominant force in the sprints, the *Pittsburgh Courier* captures a photographic image of Coachman performing the high jump at the AAU Women’s Nationals, noting how she “clears the bar with a spectacular leap.” By 1942, three years before she bested Stella Walsh in the 100-meter sprint, the *Baltimore Afro-American* recognized that the Tuskegee team took their sixth straight championship title “paced by Alice Coachman, national indoor and outdoor jumping champion, who captured two titles in addition to running the anchor leg on the championship relay quartet.” The spread featured several pictures, including a single of Coachman, the “Tuskegee flash,” crossing the finish line in the 400-meter relay.²⁰ Moreover, in the prewar years African American sports journalists often discussed female track and field athletes in their regular columns. As early in Coachman’s career as 1940, Charles Campbell of the *Baltimore Afro-American*, in his weekly column “Philly Points,” predicted that she would eventually break the world record for the high jump.²¹

Although sports coverage in general fell off during the later war years, Coachman continued to be hailed by the black press for her dominance in women’s track and field. Aided by descriptive monikers such as the “Tuskegee star,” the “flying Miss Coachman,” “Tuskegee’s 21-year-old speed queen,” and “Americas No. One woman track athlete,” African American journalists continued to celebrate Coachman’s achievements as she came to the pinnacle of her career in the United States.²² Compared to the *New York Times*’s and *Chicago Tribune*’s lackluster coverage of women’s track and field, black weeklies put Coachman front and center in 1945 as they celebrated her spectacular performance at the AAU Women’s Nationals. “Alice Coachman Crowned National Sprint Queen,” headlined the *Baltimore Afro-American* that year, noting how she had reached “the acme of her brilliant career” by dethroning Stella Walsh, who was “generally recognized as one of the all-time greats of feminine history.” Indeed, recognizing Walsh’s brilliance in the sport served to enhance Coachman’s overall achievement when she finally outran her competitor in 1945 after having been nosed out by Walsh in the 100-meter for the two prior years. In an interview with Walsh in 1944, the renowned *Afro-American*’s sportswriter, Sam Lacy, reported how the “Polish flyer” referred to Coachman as “the toughest opponent I have ever met,” and “the finest runner I’ve ever raced against.”²³

In truth, the black press’s extensive coverage of Coachman’s achievements, along with other African Americans, was often necessary to balance the fact that white dailies overlooked or downplayed the contributions of African Americans. However, while black journalists constructed Coachman’s public identity primarily in terms of race, they were aware of the gender concerns that accompanied her sport. As such, they sometimes used feature articles or weekly columns to “feminize” black women track and field athletes. In 1941 the

Baltimore Afro-American ran a feature article on the Tuskegee women track stars' plans after graduation. Playing up the femininity of the athletes, Levi Jolley wrote: "These young women, while mixing athletics with studies, enjoy all the pleasures and indicated desires to become a nurse, ... teachers, and social workers." Alice Coachman's plans included teaching or social work, but Jolley also reported that she believed "being a good wife when she marries will probably be the fulfilment of her secret ambitions."²⁴ Celebrating her achievements as an African American female track athlete, the black press was still quick to realize the importance of projecting femininity onto Coachman's identity.

Efforts by the black press to feminize Coachman and other female track athletes resulted in trivializing the athlete's abilities in their sport. The peanut oil story, which originated years before the Olympics, best illustrates this tendency. In his 1940 article "Tigerettes Owe Success to Dr. Carver's Peanut Oil," Levi Jolley refused to accept Coach Christine Evans Petty's assertion that the team's success could be attributed to strict training and competing against male athletes during practice. Due to "the smooth velvet appearance of the girls' skin in addition to their rhythm in motion," the reporter repeatedly inquired about "what was used for rubbing the girls." Petty finally acknowledged that the exclusive use of Dr. George Washington Carver's peanut oil by the women's team, but also more broadly within the athletic department, helped prevent strained muscles and Charlie horses. This allowed coaches to concentrate more on form and speed during practice and not worry about muscle problems that developed from strenuous training. There was an added benefit for the women, noted Jolley: "The girls like to use it because of the smoothness it gives their skin."²⁵

The images that the peanut oil story evokes are not only disturbing but also reveal how even the black press marginalized Coachman and her teammates. First, the story suggests that the athletic abilities of these women derived not from hard work but from a magic potion like peanut oil. The entire article, including its title, suggests a "scoop"—the sportswriter has discovered the secret to the Tuskegee women's years of dominance in track and field. Secondly, the story goes beyond imbuing these women with feminine traits to creating images full of sensuality. While the writer's words discuss the oil's benefits largely in the very feminine terms of smooth skin, the whole concept of rubbing oil on women's bodies also evokes a very sexualized view of these women.

These efforts to project feminine, even sensualized, qualities on black women track athletes reflect their ambiguous identity even within their own community of African American supporters. Celebrated by the black press for their achievements because they were African Americans, they nonetheless had trouble overcoming the stigma of being females trying to excel in a masculine sport and being represented in the press by an essentially male cadre of sportswriters.²⁶ Certainly the fact that most sports journalists were men dictated, in part, the type of coverage women athletes, in general, and African American women athletes, more specifically, would receive. Defining what would make it to sports pages, white and African American sportswriters unknowingly contributed to the loss of these women athletes from the public memory. Even as Alice Coachman retired from track and field competition, the white and black press were busy constructing the identity of another athlete coming on the scene. The creation of the public Althea Gibson would be as equally complicated.

“FLASH” AND “STROKER”



Althea Gibson's powerful serve and aggressive style of tennis served her well on the court. During the 1957 and 1958 seasons she won back-to-back Wimbledon and U.S. National Championships. Courtesy *National Archives*.

“The Slender Harlem Stroker”

The same summer Alice Coachman won Olympic gold, Althea Gibson took the national American Tennis Association (ATA) championship for the second straight year. She would go on to win the ATA title, the African American tennis association that existed alongside the white United States Lawn Tennis Association, for eight more years. However, she was still two years away from entering the hallowed grounds of Forest Hills, the national USLTA championship that eventually became the U.S. Open.²⁷

While Gibson was living a tomboyish existence on the streets of Harlem, the African American elite saw in her an exceptional talent and, hoping she would be the one to break the color barrier, groomed her to enter and excel in the high-class world of tennis.²⁸ After ascending to the pinnacle of the African American tennis community, and with the help of former tennis greats like Alice Marble, Gibson finally broke into the USLTA in 1950, culminating in her play at Forest Hills in September of that year. In 1951, she became the first African American to play at Wimbledon.

What followed was a series of disappointing years in which Gibson continued to dominate the ATA but struggled in the USLTA. Ready to give up the sport and join the WACS, the State Department asked her, along with three other players, to represent the United States on a goodwill tour of Southeast Asia during the winter and spring of 1956.

It was this tour that turned her career around. She won sixteen out of eighteen tournaments, although she faltered at Wimbledon and Forest Hills, losing both in the final round. It was the last time that would happen, however. In 1957, Gibson became the first African American—man or woman—to take the Wimbledon singles title. She entered the record books again in the late summer when she finally won at Forest Hills. From there, she seemed unstoppable. In 1958 she certainly was. She retained both the Wimbledon and Forest Hills titles, again entering the record books alongside the few other tennis greats who had enjoyed back-to-back wins of both tournaments.

As with Alice Coachman, the construction of Althea Gibson's identity by the white press rested primarily on gender. While she was at times singled out for special attention due to the racial significance of her accomplishments, generally, the amount and tenor of the coverage she received was commensurate with her white female tennis competitors. Although women were more accepted in a sport less masculinized than track and field, they had to endure negative gender labels if their play became too powerful or aggressive.²⁹

While the sport of tennis was not gendered in the same way as track and field, Gibson and her contemporaries, male and female, were routinely described in quite physical, gendered terms. Contemporary news accounts routinely commented especially on Gibson's size, referring to her as "the lithe and muscular Miss Gibson," a "lanky jumping jack of a girl," and "tall and leggy."³⁰ Furthermore, they often used such physical attributes to explain the masculine power with which she played the game. Gibson is "lean and her long arms are muscular.... When she hits the ball, it travels like a bolt out of a crossbow," wrote Kenneth Love of the *New York Times*. Following her win at Forest Hills in 1957, *Life* magazine showed a picture of Gibson in action and explained, "Althea's service gains power from her height."³¹

With her big service and powerful delivery, Gibson was often noticed in the white press for the "masculine" way in which she played the game. Yet this was a fate common of any woman who chose to play aggressive tennis, and many shied away from such displays of power to avoid being labeled masculine by the press.³² In a bio-piece that appeared in conjunction with her 1957 Wimbledon win, the *New York Times* noted that Gibson, as early as her debut at Forest Hills, had been compared to another female tennis great, Alice Marble, for her "mannish style of play." Her teaming with Maria Bueno of Brazil to capture the 1958 Wimbledon doubles championship garnered the attention of sports journalists who noticed how the Gibson-Bueno team "crushed" their opponents, "hitting the ball with manlike power." Following her win at Forest Hills in 1957, *Life* magazine compared Gibson's tennis to that of the men's singles champion Malcolm Anderson, "The two winners, as these pictures show, also played remarkably alike. Their power proved again that it takes a big serve to win in modern tennis."³³ Unlike Coachman, Gibson received more coverage from the white press, probably due in large measure to the acceptability of women's participation in the sport of tennis. However, she did have to contend with the attention given her for the "unladylike" way in which she played the game.³⁴

As evidenced by treatments from the white press, race played a more important part in Coachman's identity than in Gibson's. The hometown papers of these athletes are particularly illustrative of this difference. During the peak of Coachman's career from 1943 to 1948, the *New York Times* occasionally overlooked Coachman's achievement, highlighting

instead that of white female track athletes. The *Atlanta Constitution*, however, celebrated this native Georgian's Olympic achievement, albeit with both explicit and implicit racial commentary.

The *Times* coverage of Gibson, however, was generally anything but racialized.³⁵ Certainly much of this could be attributed to the New York paper promoting an athlete from their city, which they did with gusto. There were likely two reasons for the differences in intensity of these athletes' home town coverage. First, Gibson was a Harlem girl, whereas Coachman's home was the smaller southwest Georgia town of Albany rather than the city of Atlanta. Second, the white press of the more segregated South would be less likely to publicize the ongoing achievements of a young African American female athlete outside of some spectacular feat, such as the capturing of an Olympic gold medal and a new world record. The Northern *New York Times*, however, quickly fashioned the tennis star as “our own Althea Gibson,” and not only highlighted her tennis matches but also often mentioned her in their editorial section.³⁶

The difference between Coachman's and Gibson's white press coverages in terms of race also reflected the changes that occurred in American society during the 1940s and 1950s. Although only a decade separated their achievements, the racial dynamics of the country had changed considerably. Even as Alice Coachman was capturing women's track titles year after year, America's participation in World War II became what is now recognized as a turning point in the African American struggle for civil rights.³⁷ Black soldiers returning from war began to question the inequity of defending a country that denied them full participation in white society. Toward the end of Coachman's career, advancement was already being made in the area of sports. In 1946 Jackie Robinson breached the color line in professional baseball when he made his debut with the Montreal Royals, the top farm team of the Brooklyn Dodgers. A year later, major league baseball saw its first African American player in the twentieth century when Robinson donned a Dodger uniform. Also in 1946, the Los Angeles Rams signed Kenny Washington and Woody Strode to break professional football's thirteen-year exclusion of black athletes.³⁸

By the time Gibson won her first singles title at Wimbledon, the larger society reverberated with changes on race issues. In 1954, the Supreme Court handed down their verdict in *Brown v. Board of Education*, which declared unconstitutional the long-standing practice of “separate but equal” facilities for African Americans. Most of Gibson's advances in the world of tennis would be played, then, against the backdrop of the *Brown* decision working its way throughout the country as now well-known names in the civil rights struggle forged their way into history. Moreover, the postwar years and the onset of the Cold War further contributed to African American advances as external scrutiny of American race relations resulted in heightened internal sensitivity. Indeed, Althea Gibson benefitted from this changing America. Around the same time Rosa Parks was refusing to give her seat over to a white patron on a Montgomery, Alabama, bus, Althea Gibson's beleaguered tennis career received a second chance, thanks not only to the forward momentum of the African American civil rights movement but also to national concern with cold war enemies' criticism of racial problems within the United States.³⁹

In December 1955, the State Department invited Gibson to join three other tennis players on a tour of Southeast Asian countries, playing exhibition matches and interna-

tional tournaments along the way. By including a successful African American, they hoped to improve the image of race relations in the United States against attacks from its communist antagonists.⁴⁰ Looking back on the experience, Gibson herself recognized the racial significance of her participation:

I've never been exactly sure why I was selected to make the tour in the first place..... I know it happened soon after the killing of Emmett Till in Georgia, and world opinion of the racial situation in the United States was at a low ebb, So I suppose that was the main reason why I, a colored girl, was invited to help represent our country in Southeast Asia. I certainly wasn't picked because I was a champion; at the time I was champion of nothing and unlikely ever to be.⁴¹

Certainly in light of the country's changing racial climate, Althea Gibson's significance as a race hero was important to a black press that viewed the achievement of black women athletes primarily in racial terms. Indeed, Gibson's first win at Forest Hills in 1957 was played against the backdrop of the events of the "Little Rock Nine," when the governor of Arkansas called out the National Guard to prevent nine African American children from entering a white public school.⁴² During this heightened struggle for civil rights, the black press looked to Gibson to be visible and vocal concerning race issues. Unfortunately, these expectations proved to be ones under which Gibson would eventually suffer when, at the height of her career, the black press turned on her for refusing to assume a more outspoken role as race hero.

Gibson's relationship with the black press began in the late 1940s when she was regularly featured in sports sections for her consecutive victories at the ATA nationals. In 1950, however, she took on new prominence in black weeklies when she was invited to play at Forest Hills and in 1951 at Wimbledon, breaking the color barrier at both of these bastions of the white tennis world. "Althea Gibson will become the first Negro tennis star to crash the 'lily-white' citadel of this American sport," printed the *Pittsburgh Courier* following the news that Gibson would participate in the 1950 Forest Hills tournament. Most black papers were quick to identify the young and inexperienced star as a work in progress, however. "She plays a good attacking game, but it is erratic," noted one journalist. Nonetheless, Jackie Reemes of the *New York Amsterdam News* represented the common opinion of the day among African American writers when he reported that "there is little doubt that more will be heard from Althea in future competition."⁴³

During the lean years of 1952-1955 when Gibson continued to dominate the African American ATA tournaments but was struggling in the white USLTA, the black press remained respectively silent on her struggles. However, from the time Gibson participated in the State Department's goodwill tour in 1956 to her eventual win at Wimbledon, her exploits in the "lily-white" world of tennis once again became common fare in sports columns of the black press. During this period of Gibson's career, African American journalists celebrated her achievements through their positive physical descriptions of her and their tendency to come to her defense when necessary.⁴⁴

Similar to the white press, black sportswriters often described Gibson in physical terms. However, their descriptions highlighted both her statuesque femininity and her powerful game, constructions the black press did not see as contradictory. Historians Patricia Vertinsky and Gwendolyn Captain have posited that African American leaders, coaches, and journalists worked hard to dispel the myth of the black "Amazon" woman by cultivat-

ing instead a more feminine image of female athletes.⁴⁵ “The willowy Miss Gibson,” “the slender Harlem stroker,” and “the lean New Yorker” were common descriptions of Gibson during this period in her career. The *Baltimore Afro-American* also reported that she was “looking fresh and sporting an attractive hair-do” when she appeared on the Dave Garroway “This is New York” television show in 1956.⁴⁶

At the same time, however, African American journalists did not shy away from referring to Gibson’s power. Femininity and strength joined nicely in the female African American ideal, in contrast to white womanhood that shied away from physical strength as a masculine characteristic.⁴⁷ “Lithe and quick in action,” reported the *Pittsburgh Courier* early in her career, Gibson “loves to slam the ball with exuberance.” Describing her win at Wimbledon, Gibson’s opponent Darlene Hard “was simply no match for the powerful all-court game of Miss Gibson.” Later that year, *Ebony* highlighted her “extraordinary power and big service.”⁴⁸

The second characteristic of Gibson’s coverage prior to her falling out with the black press was the tendency on the part of African American journalists to defend her, as necessary, against negative reports. Following news that she was somewhat aloof with other players at the 1956 Wimbledon tournament, a writer for the *Chicago Defender* commented, “She is one of the most dignified girls I’ve ever seen, with more poise and personality than all the rest of the tennis players put together.” With all her positive attributes, he continued, it is no wonder that Gibson had “become the target for jealousy.” The following week, after her loss at Wimbledon, Fay Young devoted his entire weekly column to the tennis star. Discussing how misunderstood she was and how he had attempted to mold her, Young wrote of how he had gently chided her at an ATA meet for not mixing more with other players. The sportswriter remembered how Gibson had graciously accepted his advice. He concluded with further support: “We are all with her—win or lose.”⁴⁹

The point at which the black press began to attack Gibson rather than revere and defend her came during the summer of 1957. Following her win at Wimbledon, she traveled to Chicago to play in the USLTA tournament at River Forest. On the surface, the black press was upset by Gibson’s unwillingness to be more attentive to them at the Chicago tournament in July. Journalists for the *Chicago Defender* and the *Pittsburgh Courier* were particularly indignant. In a feature article, the *Defender*’s Russ Cowans accused her of giving reporters “one of the best brush-offs most of them had ever had” and suggested that instead of the Wimbledon trophy, the Queen should have “given her a few words of advice on graciousness.” Continuing the diatribe in his weekly column, Cowans again laid into Gibson for being “as ungracious as a stubborn jackass” and “the most arrogant athlete it has been my displeasure to meet.” Wendell Smith of the *Courier* attacked Gibson for taking on the persona of a prima donna after her Wimbledon victory: “The lean girl from the streets of Harlem has become so obsessed with herself and her court skill that she apparently speaks with only kings and queens.” Smith even resorted to attacking Gibson intellectually. Suggesting that she merely “skipped” through Florida A&M College with the help of her African American benefactors, he continued, “She clearly established the fact here last week that she is neither scholarly nor smart by her arrogant, despicable treatment of friendly sportswriters.”⁵⁰

Both papers also continued to attack Gibson in subtle ways. In 1958, rather than highlighting her repeat of the women’s singles and doubles titles at Wimbledon, the

Defender's coverage focused instead on her "failure" to also take the mixed doubles title. The *Courier*, though eventually somewhat more forgiving than the Chicago weekly, spoke of Gibson in masculinized terms, a description more common to the white press but unheard of by the black press prior to the Chicago affair. Their coverage of the now famed River Forest tournament in Chicago reported that "there was never any doubts that *man-nish*-playing Miss Gibson would emerge victorious" [emphasis by author].⁵¹

However, the prima donna explanation was, in reality, a smoke screen. References to Gibson's "difficult" personality had long been a source of discussion by the black press. In 1956, Fay Young of the *Chicago Defender* noted how he had tried to help her along in this area, as another *Defender* journalist complained that "the Gibson gal is being accused of giving herself airs" because of her incredible success on the Southeast Asia tour. *Baltimore APO-American* sportswriter Sam Lacy's biographical sketch of Gibson published just before the 1957 Wimbledon play identified these tendencies as part of her personality: "It is her makeup to be moody, indifferent, sometimes arrogant." Chalking this up to her "tom-boy" upbringing on the streets of Harlem, Lacy observed that "she has a way of going into her hard shell and refusing to come out of it." In a prescient conclusion, he offered the observation that "more often than not, it is the press that feels the brunt of the Gibson arrogance."⁵²

Her problems with the black press, then, are best understood if considered in terms of how they constructed her public identity as an African American. To black journalists, her acceptance into the white, high-class world of tennis was imbued with deep racial significance. Sam Lacy called her win at Wimbledon "the greatest triumph a colored athlete has accomplished in my time" and "the biggest sports victory ever placed in the record books for a person of my race." He carved out Gibson's achievement in such heroic proportions, in part, because she did it alone with no others who had come before her to smooth the way. Given the integral part Lacy played in the Jackie Robinson saga, his compliment to Gibson during the Robinson era was high praise indeed.⁵³

Yet Gibson's position as a race hero in the black press was fraught with ambiguity. Earlier in her career, while defending her from attackers who called her "tight-lipped and moody," a journalist for the *Chicago Defender* assured his readers that "she looks upon herself as an evangelist whose skill with the tennis racquet, and her sincerity, is breaking the colour barriers." Apparently, while she was accepting of the role in some measure, the press was accepting of her "quirks." During the Chicago fiasco, however, reports circulated that, when asked if she like being compared to Jackie Robinson, she responded, "No, I don't consider myself a representative of my people. I am thinking of me and nobody else."⁵⁴

There were those of the black press who defended Gibson even after the Chicago incident. Lacy continued to suggest that her bad press was, in part, due to her personality: "She answers readily and honestly, with no thought of softening her opinion for the sake of sparing feelings or playing the diplomat." Calling her a "distaff Jackie Robinson," he compared the two, suggesting that reporters often became offended and were "set back on their heels when they learned that neither Althea nor Jackie could be patient with ve-neers." The *Pittsburgh Courier* even gave equal time to her supporters by printing a representative letter from a fan who attacked the black press for its treatment of Gibson. Re-

minding people that the State Department thought her a responsible and good representative of the country in 1956, the fan insisted that “she does not go on the tennis court to represent her race and any question put to her along this line can only be a subtle trap.”⁵⁵

Comments from the white press on this subject give insight into how much the issue centered around Gibson’s position as a race hero. In the fall of 1957, the *Pittsburgh Courier* reprinted a series of biographical articles written by Ted Poston of the *New York Post*. Calling Gibson a community project, Poston suggested that she was a throwback to postslavery days when African Americans came together to promote the most talented ones of the community. Here, he concluded, “a Harlem urchin discovered by Negroes, nurtured by Negroes, trained by Negroes, educated by Negroes, was now the best in the world in ‘the game for ladies and gentlemen.’” Against the backdrop of her racial significance, a *Time* magazine cover story may grant the best insight into the source of the problem. The feature story reported how Gibson came up against some Jim Crow problems in Chicago, being refused a room at the Oak Park Hotel and a reservation at a swanky Chicago restaurant. “Officials and newsmen burned with rage,” the journalist wrote, “but Althea hardly noticed it.”⁵⁶ The African American community had much invested in Althea Gibson and were disappointed when she did not live up to their expectations as a race figure.

Finally, Gibson herself attributed her problems with the black press to her hesitancy to be a trailblazer for her race. “I have never set myself up as a champion of the Negro race,” she wrote in her autobiography. Taking her hat off to Jackie Robinson’s achievements, Gibson nonetheless chose to handle her success in her own way, which was to shy away from any role as a race hero. However, she recognized that there were those in the African American community who disagreed with her position. The real reason that quite a few members of the black press had been uncomplimentary, she contended, was that they resented her refusal “to turn my tennis achievements into a rousing crusade for racial equality.”⁵⁷

How do we come to terms with the contemporary press treatment of these two athletes and their subsequent neglect by the historical community? Black and white sports-writers alike covered Coachman’s and Gibson’s athletic careers at least to some extent, and in Gibson’s case, expansively. However, the sports stories about these women were more about gender or race rather than their prowess on the track field or the tennis court. Instead of attributing their athletic accomplishments to dedication and hard work, even the black press sometimes searched for the answer in magic potions like peanut oil.

It is no wonder then that Alice Coachman, Althea Gibson, and others like them have been lost to the public memory. While sources are available, contemporary press accounts trivialized them as athletes to the extent that they have been essentially forgotten for the very achievements that made them newsworthy in the first place. Yet the status of these women within the African American community, as well as their contributions toward breaking down racial barriers, make them important subjects of study. However, even as black women athletes are popular subjects for children’s biographies, their absence from the genre of the historical biography is striking and begs for correction.⁵⁸ Moreover, more research into the ways in which the contemporary African American community viewed these athletes’ achievements and their position in the African American public memory are other areas ripe for study.

In 1956, Kenneth Love of the *New York Times* related a comment from Gibson regarding her public identity. "I am just another tennis player, not a Negro tennis player," she insisted.⁵⁹ Yet even at the height of her career, neither the white or black press cast her as such. Rather, as the press constructed Alice Coachman and Althea Gibson primarily in terms of gender or race, their identities as athletes were relegated to a distant third. Fraught with ambiguity for both these athletes during their careers, such construction has also led to their current status as black women athletes on the margin.

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1. *Chicago Defender*, 31 July 1948, p. 11.
 2. See John Hoberman, *Darwin's Athletes: How Sport Has Damaged Black America and Preserved the Myth of Race* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1997), xxi.
 3. Scholarly work on the subject of race and sport, particularly the African American experience, has exploded in the last ten to fifteen years. Recent influential studies on some of the key issues involved in the subject are Hoberman, *Darwin's Athletes* and David K. Wiggins, *Glory Bound: Black Athletes in a White America* (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 1997). There are also excellent biographies on Jackie Robinson and Jesse Owens that provide valuable historical context and take up issues of athleticism and the cultural construction of race, such as Jules Tygiel, *Baseball's Great Experiment: Jackie Robinson and His Legacy*, expanded ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997) and William J. Baker, *Jesse Owens: An American Life* (New York: Free Press, 1986). John Carroll has covered similar territory for football with a lesser known twentieth-century athlete in *Fritz Pollard: Pioneer in Racial Advancement* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998). Two valuable historiographical essays exist on the subject. Jeffrey T. Sammons, "'Race' and Sport: A Critical Historical Examination," *Journal of Sport History* 21 (Fall 1994): 203-278, although at this juncture somewhat dated, provides an important assessment of the scholarship, especially his summary on gender on pages 266-269. For a recent, extensive bibliography, see David K. Wiggins, "The African American Athletic Experience," in *The African American Experience: An Historiographical and Bibliographical Guide*, ed. Arvarh E. Strickland and Robert E. Weems, Jr. (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 2001), 255-277. While the field of African American women in sports has lagged somewhat behind that of men, the 1990s has witnessed substantial growth in this area as well. Some of the best include "'Cinderellas' of Sport: Black Women in Track and Field," in Susan K. Cahn, *Coming on Strong: Gender and Sexuality in Twentieth-Century Women? Sport* (New York: Free Press, 1994), 110-139; "Members Only: Class, Race, and Amateur Tennis for Women in the 1950s," in Mary Jo Festle, *Playing Nice: Politics and Apologies in Women's Sports* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 53-71; Gwendolyn Captain, "Enter Ladies and Gentlemen of Color: Gender, Sport, and the Ideal of African American Manhood and Womanhood During the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries," *Journal of Sport History* 18 (Spring 1991): 81-102; Patricia Vertinsky and Gwendolyn Captain, "More Myth than History: American Culture and Representations of the Black Female's Athletic Ability," *Journal of Sport History* 25 (Fall 1998): 532-561; Cindy Himes Gissendanner, "African-American Women in Competitive Sport, 1920-1960," in *Women, Sport, and Culture*, ed. Susan Birrell and Cheryl L. Cole (Champaign, Ill.: Human Kinetics, 1994); Gissendanner, "African American Women Olympians: The Impact of Race, Gender, and Class Ideologies, 1932-1968," *Research Quarterly for Exercise and Sport* 67 (June 1996): 172-182; and Linda D. Williams, "Sportswomen in Black and White: Sports History From an Afro-American Perspective," in *Women, Media and Sport: Challenging Gender Values*, ed. Pamela J. Creedon (Thousand Oaks, California: Sage, 1994), 45-66. One interesting phenomenon that exists in the study of black women athletes is the absence of historical biographies of these women. While biographies of Jackie Robinson, Jesse Owens, Muhammad Ali, and other male black athletes abound, the stories of even better-known women athletes such as Althea Gibson and Wilma Rudolph have been relegated to children's books. Indeed, the question of why the stories of black women athletes are appropriate for children's books but not adult literature deserves further study. In addition to Gibson and Rudolph,

Alice Coachman and her quest for the gold has also been created in juvenile literature. Furthermore, the trend continues into the present. Both Jackie Joyner-Kersey and Marion Jones, two recent African American female Olympic gold medal winners, have had their stories limited to this genre.

4. Cahn, *Coming on Strong*, 114-117.
5. *Ibid.*, 117-118. For more on the influence of work on the identity of African American women, see Jacqueline Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women, Work, and the Family from Slavery to the Present* (New York: Basic Books, 1985).
6. Cahn, *Coming on Strong*, 121, 125-128.
7. Festle, *Playing Nice*, 55, 58. Dr. Reginald Weir was the first African American to play in a USLTA tournament, the National Indoor Championships, also in New York. This is not to be confused with the famed Forest Hills tournament, which was the National Outdoor Championships, where Althea Gibson eventually broke the color barrier in 1950. Althea Gibson, *I Always Wanted To Be Somebody* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1958), 55.
8. Gibson, *I Always Wanted To Be Somebody*, 46.
9. Michael D. Davis, *Black American Women in Olympic Track and Field* (Jefferson, N. C.: McFarland & Company, Inc., 1992), 40; Ed Decker, “Alice Coachman,” in *Contemporary Black Biography: Profiles from the International Black Community*, 32 vols., ed. Shirelle Phelps (Detroit: Gale Research, Inc., 1992), 18: 29.
10. My references to the “white press” are inclusive of the following newspapers—*New York Times*, *Chicago Tribune*, *Boston Globe*, *Atlanta Constitution*—and *Time* and *Life* magazines. “Black press” references include the following black weeklies—*New York Age*, *New York Amsterdam News*, *Chicago Defender*, *Baltimore Afro-American*, and *Pittsburgh Courier*—as well as *Ebony* magazine. Research into these publications’ reporting of Alice Coachman’s career covers 1939 through 1948, and 1950 through 1958 for Althea Gibson’s. Although Gibson was featured regularly in the black press in the late 1940s as a dominant force in the black American Tennis Association (ATA), she did not emerge in the white press until 1950. In the white press, the *New York* and *Atlanta* papers were chosen in particular because they represent the closest to a “home town” paper available for Gibson and Coachman. The black weeklies were selected in general because of their prominence in the black community as well as the influence of sportswriters such as Sam Lacy (*Baltimore Afro-American*) and Wendell Smith (*Pittsburgh Courier*) in the black sporting world.
11. The extent to which the white press highlighted gender in their news accounts is further illustrated when the neglect of women’s track and field is compared with the extensive treatment accorded American female swimmers during the Olympics. Women swimmers received considerably more coverage than women track athletes, including spreads in several newspapers complete with photographs. The difference is largely attributable to the fact that swimming was an acceptable sport for women. Swimming was not thought to be injurious to women’s bodies, nor did it detract from their femininity. Historian Susan Cahn argues that the acceptability of swimming over track also speaks to race and class distinctions since most swimmers were white, middle-class women. See Cahn, *Coming on Strong*, 130.
12. The *New York Times* did feature a picture of the women’s track and field team marching in the opening ceremonies, although the caption did not identify them. However, none of the U. S. women’s track and field team were photographed participating in their sport. See *New York Times*, 1 August 1948, sec. V, p. 3.
13. Audrey Patterson became the first African American woman to medal in the Olympic Games, taking a bronze in the 200-meter sprint.
14. “American Athletes Sweep the Olympics,” *Life*, 23 August 1948, p. 28; *New York Times*, 15 August 1948, sec. V, p. 1.
15. *Chicago Tribune*, 5 July 1942, sec. 2, p. 2; *Boston Globe*, 1 July 1945, sec. 2, p. 4; *New York Times*, 11 January 1946, p. 24.
16. *Chicago Tribune*, 1 July 1945, sec. 2, p. 4; *New York Times*, 9 July 1944, sec. III, p. 1; *New York Times*, 5 August 1946, p. 27.

17. *New York Times*, 15 August 1948, sec. V, p. 1.
18. *New York Times*, 1 July 1945, sec. III, p. 3; *New York Times*, 5 August 1946, p. 27.
19. *Atlanta Constitution*, 8 August 1948, sec. B, p. 11. The *Chicago Tribune* subordinated both gender and race in their Olympic coverage but not to highlight Coachman as an athlete. Bather, it portrayed her as a victorious American. The *Tribune* dramatized the high-jump competition, describing how darkness and drizzling rain descended upon the stadium, with Coachman in the end victorious. "Thus the track meet ended as begun eight days ago, with victory for an American and the Star Spangled Banner of the United States providing the closing music" (*Chicago Tribune*, 8 August 1948, sec. 2, p. 1.). By the 1950s, the victory would be not only for an American but also for America, as the United States and the Soviets discovered the world of international sports as another arena in which to wage their cold war. As a result, women's track and field would gain acceptability in the United States as part of the arsenal to assert American superiority over the Soviet system. For more on the Cold War status of the sport, see Cahn, *Coming on Strong*, 130-133.
20. *Pittsburgh Courier*, 9 July 1941, p. 16; *Baltimore Afro-American*, 11 July 1942, p. 23.
21. *Baltimore Afro-American*, 13 July 1940, p. 19. The *Chicago Defender's* Fay Young also discusses women's track and held in his weekly column, pointing to the white press's biased coverage of the 1941 AAU Indoor Nationals. See the *Chicago Defender*, 19 April 1941, p. 24.
22. *Chicago Defender*, 21 August 1943, p. 19; *Baltimore Afro-American*, 15 August 1944, p. 18; *Pittsburgh Courier*, 7 July 1945, p. 18.
23. *Baltimore Afro-American*, 7 July 1945, p. 18; *Baltimore Afro-American*, 15 July 1944, p. 18.
24. *Baltimore Afro-American*, 12 July 1941, p. 19. This effort to imbue Coachman with feminine qualities resurfaced during the Olympics. Although discussing in some detail that she was favored to win the high jump, the *Pittsburgh Courier* suggested that the two-year course in tailoring she completed at Tuskegee made her popular with her teammates when they needed help mending their uniforms. See the *Pittsburgh Courier*, 7 August 1948, p. 26.
25. *Baltimore Afro-American*, 13 July 1940, p. 19.
26. Coverage of the later war years and 1948 Olympic games likewise reflects Coachman's ambiguous status within the black press community. When newspapers began to scale back their press in support of the war effort, photographic coverage of the women all but disappeared while pictures of male track and field athletes continued. Even Coachman's Olympic coverage, although expansive compared to white papers, does not compare favorably with the extensive press she received in the early years of her career.
27. Biographical information for Althea Gibson is extracted from her autobiography, Gibson, *I Always Wanted to Be Somebody* and a bio-piece written for the *New York Post*, reprinted in the magazine section of the *Pittsburgh Courier* in installments, September 21, 28, and October 5, 12, 19, and 26, 1957.
28. Festle, *Playing Nice*, 60.
29. Festle has likewise explored the theme of women tennis players being criticized for playing too masculine a game. See Festle, *Playing Nice*, 67.
30. *New York Times*, 9 September 1957, p. 33; "That Gibson Girl," *Time*, 26 August 1957, p. 44; *Chicago Tribune*, 31 August 1950, sec. 4, p. 2; *Boston Globe*, 9 September 1957, p. 11.
31. *New York Times*, 24 June 1956, sec. V, p. 3; "A Cowpuncher and Negro Make Tennis History," *Life*, 23 September 1957, p.56.
32. Festle, *Playing Nice*, 67.
33. *New York Times*, 7 July 1957, sec. V, p. 4; *Atlanta Constitution*, 5 July 1958, p. 10; "Cowpuncher and Negro," p. 56.
34. Also at issue for Gibson that had not been a concern for Coachman was the standard of propriety and class demanded by the tennis elite. When such standards were breached, the white press could be brutal. During the 1957 Wimbledon contest, the *Boston Globe* reported that, after receiving their trophies from Queen Elizabeth II, "Althea backed away in the prescribed fashion but the irrepress-

- ible Miss Hard turned her back and blithely skipped toward the dressing room.” As a result, Gibson’s opponent became referred to as “California’s chunky Darlene Hard” and the “chirpy blonde waitress.” See the *Boston Globe*, 7 July 1957, p. 57; “The Power Game,” *Time*, 15 July 1957, p. 61; *Chicago Tribune*, 7 July 1957, sec. 2, p. 1.
35. This is not to say that race was absent from the *Times* coverage of Gibson. Kenneth Love likened her to a “panther on an Arizona mesa” when he described how at home she was on the tennis court. “As she waits, half crouching for a serve,” he wrote, “the comparison comes naturally to mind” (*New York Times*, 24 June 1956, sec. V, p. 3.). Even in describing her play at the 1957 Wimbledon win, another *Times* journalist could not resist the animal comparison: “Behind her serves and her severe ground shots, Althea moved tigerishly to the net to cut away her volleys” (*New York Times*, 7 July 1957, sec. V, p. 1.).
 36. For example, see *New York Times*, 11 September 1956, p. 34; 8 July 1957, p. 20; 10 September 1957, p. 32; and 9 September 1958, p. 34. The reference to “our own Althea Gibson” is from 8 July 1957, p. 22.
 37. C. Vann Woodward, *The Strange Career of Jim Crow*, 3rd rev. ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), 130-131.
 38. For an excellent study of the integration of major league baseball, see Tygiel, *Baseball’s Great Experiment*. For football see Thomas G. Smith, “Outside the Pale: The Exclusion of Blacks from the National Football League, 1934-1946,” *Journal of Sport History* 15 (Winter 1988): 277.
 39. For a good overview of the importance of the Cold War to the African American civil rights movement, see especially the introduction in Mary L. Dudziak, *Cold War, Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2000), 3-17.
 40. Festle, *Playing Nice*, 62.
 41. Gibson, *I Always Wanted To Be Somebody*, 101. Emmett Till was a 14-year-old African American teenager from Chicago who was beaten and lynched for “flirting” with a white woman in 1955. Gibson was mistaken about the location, however. The crime occurred in Mississippi, while Till was visiting his uncle. The two men arrested for the crime were acquitted by an all-white jury in September of the same year. Bruce Adelson, *Brushing Back Jim Crow: The Integration of Minor-League Baseball in the American South* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1999), 160-161.
 42. Dudziak, *Cold War*, 115-118.
 43. *Pittsburgh Courier*, 12 August 1950, p. 23; *New York Amsterdam News*, 9 September 1950, p. 27.
 44. In particular, see sports sections in the *Baltimore Afro-American*, the *Pittsburgh Courier*, and the *Chicago Defender* for the period 1952-1955, which all featured Gibson and her victories in the black ATA tournaments but stayed conspicuously silent as she struggled to regain her foothold in the white USLTA tournaments.
 45. Vertinsky and Captain, “More Myth than History,” 545.
 46. *Chicago Defender*, 21 July 1956, p. 17; *Baltimore Afro-American*, 22 June 1957, p. 16; *Baltimore Afro-American*, 30 June 1956, p. 14; *Baltimore Afro-American*, 21 July 1956, p. 7.
 47. Cahn, *Coming on Strong*, 117-118,
 48. *Pittsburgh Courier*, 2 September 1950, p. 1; *Pittsburgh Courier*, 13 July 1957, p. 24; “Tennis Queen From Harlem,” *Ebony*, October 1957, p. 91.
 49. *Chicago Defender*, 7 July 1956, p. 17; *Chicago Defender*, 14 July 1956, p. 17.
 50. *Chicago Defender*, 27 July 1957, p. 1; *Chicago Defender*, 2 July 1957, p. 24; *Pittsburgh Courier*, 27 July 1957, p. 24.
 51. *Chicago Defender*, 12 July 1958, p. 1; *Pittsburgh Courier*, 3 August 1957, p. 27.
 52. *Chicago Defender*, 14 July 1956, p. 17; *Chicago Defender*, 7 July 1956, p. 17; *Baltimore Afro-American*, 29 June 1957, magazine section, pp. 2, 6.
 53. *Baltimore Afro-American*, 13 July 1957, p. 14. For Lacy’s contribution to the Jackie Robinson crusade, see Tygiel, *Baseball’s Great Experiment*, 42-43, 63-64.

54. *Chicago Defender*, 7 July 1956, p. 17; *Pittsburgh Courier*, 27 July 1957, p. 24.
55. *Baltimore Afro-American*, 20 September 1958, p. 13; *Pittsburgh Courier*, 10 August 1957, p. 24.
56. *Pittsburgh Courier*, 21 September 1957, p. 24; *Pittsburgh Courier*, 26 October 1957, magazine section, p. 3; "That Gibson Girl," *Time*, 26 August 1957, p. 48.
57. Gibson, *I Always Wanted To Be Somebody*, 158-159.
58. See conclusion of note 3.
59. *New York Times*, 24 June 1956, sec. V, p. 3.