

# Althea Gibson

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Trailblazing athlete Althea Gibson became the first great African-American player in women's tennis. Raised primarily in Harlem section of New York City, she won a string of American Tennis Association titles on the African-American circuit. After being allowed entry to the major tournaments, she became the first black player to win Wimbledon and the French and U.S. Open titles. Gibson turned professional in 1959, and made more history by becoming the first African-American competitor on the women's pro golf tour in the 1960s. She was inducted into the International Tennis Hall of Fame in 1971, and later served as Commissioner of Athletics for the state of New Jersey.

## EARLY LIFE

Althea Gibson blazed a new trail in the sport of tennis, winning some of the sport's biggest titles in the 1950s and becoming the game's first black champion. Raised primarily in the Harlem borough of New York City, where Gibson and her family moved when she was young, her life had its hardships. Her family lived on public assistance for a time. Gibson struggled in the classroom as well, and often skipped school all together, but loved to play sports - especially ping-pong. After winning several tournaments hosted by the local recreation department, Gibson was introduced to the Harlem River Tennis Courts in 1941. Incredibly, just a year after picking up a racket for the first time, Gibson won a local tournament sponsored by the American Tennis Association, an African-American organization established to promote and sponsor tournaments for black players. For Gibson, two more ATA titles followed in 1944 and 1945. After losing one title in 1946, Gibson won 10 straight championships from 1947-1956.

## MAKING HISTORY

Gibson's success at those ATA tournaments paved the way for her to attend college on a sports scholarship. She graduated from the school in 1953, but it was a struggle for her to get by. At one point, she even thought of leaving sports all together to join the U.S. Army. A good deal of her frustration had to do with the fact that so much of the tennis world was closed off to her. The white-dominated, white-managed sport was segregated in the U.S. in much the same way that the world around it was. The breaking point came in 1950 when Alice Mable, a former tennis No. 1 herself, wrote a piece in American Lawn Tennis magazine lambasting her sport for denying a player of Gibson's caliber to compete in the world's best tournaments. Mable's article caught notice and in 1951, and Gibson made history when she became the first African-American ever invited to play at Wimbledon. A year later, she was a Top 10 player in the U.S. She then climbed even higher, to No. 7 in 1953.

In 1955, Gibson and her game were sponsored by the United States Lawn Tennis Association, which sent her around the world on a State Department tour that saw her compete in places like India, Pakistan and Burma. Measuring 5-feet 11-inches, and possessing superb power and athletic skill, Gibson seemed destined for bigger victories. In 1956, it all came together when she won the French Open. Wimbledon and U.S. Open titles followed in 1957 and 1958. In all, Gibson powered her way to 56 singles and doubles championships before turning pro in 1959.

For her part, however, Gibson downplayed her pioneering role. "I have never regarded myself as a crusader," she said in her 1958 autobiography, *I Always Wanted to Be Somebody*. "I don't consciously beat the drums for any cause, not even the negro in the United States."

### **COMMERCIAL SUCCESS**

As a professional, Gibson continued to win - she landed the singles title in 1960 - but just as importantly, she started to make money. She was reportedly paid \$100,000 for a playing a series of matches before Harlem Globetrotter games. For a short time, too, the athletically gifted Gibson played on the professional golf tour. But failing to win on the course as she had on the courts, she eventually returned to tennis. In 1968, with the advent of tennis' Open era, Gibson tried to repeat her past success. She was too old and too slow-footed, however, to keep up with her younger counterparts.

Following her retirement, Althea Gibson, was inducted into the International Tennis Hall of Fame in 1971. She stayed connected to sports, however, through a number of service positions. Beginning in 1975, she served 10 years as Commissioner of Athletics for the state of New Jersey. She was also a member of the governor's council on physical fitness.

### **LATER STRUGGLES**

But just as her early childhood had been, Gibson's last few years were dominated by hardship. She nearly went bankrupt before former tennis great Billy Jean King and others stepped in to help her out. Her health, too, went into decline. She suffered a stroke and developed serious heart problems. On September 28, 2003, Gibson died of respiratory failure in East Orange, New Jersey.

Biography courtesy of BIO.com

**Name:** \_\_\_\_\_ **Date:** \_\_\_\_\_

**1.** Althea Gibson was the first black champion and won some big titles in which sport?

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**2.** Althea Gibson had to overcome barriers in order to become a champion.

Support this conclusion with evidence from the text.

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**3.** What is the main idea of this text?

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4. The text describes Althea Gibson as a "trailblazing athlete." Someone who is "trailblazing" leads the way in a new field. Why might Althea Gibson be considered a trailblazing athlete?

Support your answer with evidence from the text.

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