

HOLIDAY HOUSE | EDUCATOR'S GUIDE



Playing to Win

How Althea Gibson Broke Barriers and Changed Tennis Forever

by Karen Deans

illustrated by Elbrite Brown

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About the Book

A new and updated edition of the picture book about the woman called “The Jackie Robinson of tennis.”

Although stars like Serena Williams cite Althea Gibson as an inspiration, Gibson’s story is not well-known to many young people today. Growing up tough and rebellious in Harlem, Althea took that fighting attitude and used it to go after her goals of being a tennis champion, and at a time when tennis was a game played mostly by wealthy white people in country clubs that excluded African Americans.

In 1956, she became the first Black American to win a major championship when she won at The French Open. When she won the celebrated Wimbledon tournament the following year, Gibson shook hands with the Queen of England. Not bad for a kid from the streets of Harlem.

With determination and undeniable skill, Althea Gibson became a barrier-breaking, record-setting, and world-famous sportswoman. This new and updated edition of this inspirational biography contains recent information on the impact of Gibson’s legacy.

Discussion Questions

- Althea Gibson’s parents were sharecroppers in South Carolina. What is a sharecropper? How did this make their life difficult? Why did the Gibson’s send three-year-old Althea to live with relatives in the north?
- Althea was nine years old when her parents moved to Harlem in New York City. Describe Althea’s life in Harlem. How did sports help her turn her life around?
- Gibson was once described as having “a restless, determined nature.” Explain how these traits served her well when she became a professional athlete.



- What is a mentor? Most successful people have had mentors along the way that advised and guided them. Who was Althea’s first mentor? What did he see in Althea that no other person had recognized? How did he change the course of her life?
- What was the American Tennis Association (ATA)? Explain why Althea could only play in tournaments sponsored by the ATA. How does this reveal the racial discrimination in the United States in the 1940s? Gibson wanted to expand her tennis opportunities and dreamed of playing with the United States Tennis Association. What made this almost impossible?
- Explain the term “racial barrier.” What was Althea’s first chance to break this barrier? Define contender. How did she become a contender in the sport of tennis?
- There were times when Althea doubted herself and her ability to play the game. Then she was appointed “goodwill ambassador” for the United States. What was her role as “goodwill ambassador”? How did this opportunity give her courage to find new opportunities and work toward greater goals in her sport?
- What became Gibson’s ultimate goal? How did she eventually achieve it? How might her story inspire those who doubt themselves? Explain how she pathed the way for athletes who want to be serious contenders, especially women of color.
- This biography of Gibson ends when she finishes at the top of her game. Take a look at the “Important Dates” in the back of the book. How do these dates tell the rest of her story?
- Situational irony may be described as the opposite of what you might expect to happen. Consider the racial discrimination that Althea faced in her professional career. Then explain why the sculpture of her on the grounds of the United States Open (formerly Forest Hills) is an example of situational irony.

Guide prepared by Pat Scales, retired school librarian and independent consultant, Greenville, South Carolina.

About the Creators

Karen Deans has worked as a journalist and is also a muralist, illustrator, writer, and entrepreneur. She lives in the Washington, D.C. area with her husband and three children. Surprised when she was unable to find biographies of many of the women she admired to share with her daughter, she decided to write her own. Her other books include *Swing Sisters: The Story of the International Sweethearts of Rhythm*.

Elbrite Brown is an illustrator, artist, and high school art teacher. He was named a Coretta Scott King / John Steptoe Award for New Talent for his illustrations for *My Family Plays Music* by Judy Cox. More than anything else, Elbrite looks at art as a way for him to inspire others. While doing research on Althea Gibson, he went to tennis matches and studied photographs and videos of the great star in action. He came to feel that Althea Gibson was as graceful as a ballerina and tried to capture just the right sense of movement in this book.

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