

## LEGENDS

# Alice Coachman-Davis: Black Olympic pioneer

**Question:** Who was the first black woman to win an Olympic gold medal for the United States?

**Answer:** Wilma Rudolph did it during the 1960 Games in Rome, Italy.

Nothing could be further from the truth.

The correct answer is Alice Coachman-Davis.

Coachman became the first black woman to capture first place in the Olympics in 1948 in the high jump at the London Olympiad. She set a new Olympic record with a leap of 5-6 1/4.

The gold medalist was a product of Tuskegee Institute at that time and she later earned her undergraduate degree from Albany State.

For nearly four decades, most of us have been led to believe that Rudolph was the first. And when you think about it, it's easy to see why. In '60, television began to blossom as a medium and the publicity it helped to generate made instant celebrities out of the gold medal winners at Rome.

In '48, television was embryonic and sports coverage was something that the networks had just started to dabble in. Coachman-Davis (then Alice Coachman) went unnoticed and unrecognized in the minds of many Americans.

Coachman-Davis discovered later that some of the history books were just as unaware of her distinction among America's black sports pioneers.

The children she taught at the Turner Job Corps in Albany, Ga. were also among those who were led to believe that Rudolph's accomplishments were a first.

Coachman-Davis recalled the scene vividly.

"I was a health and physical education instructor and I had given my students an assignment to read about track and field. People around Albany knew what I had done as an athlete. But they became confused when they read in the history books that Wilma Rudolph was the first. So I had to bring my gold medal and certificate to show the kids that I had the proof to back up what I had told them.

"I'm not bitter about it, but it's sad. They never did their research. It's almost as if they were trying to leave me out of the record books because they never printed it. The difference between myself and Wilma Rudolph is that she came along 12 years later when television was wide open. There was a lot of publicity. So from that standpoint, the media can make or break you."

The same identity problem cropped up in recent years when the U.S. hosted the '84 Games in Los Angeles. Coachman-Davis' bosses wanted to send her to LA to attend the Games. But when inquiries were made about tickets to the Olympiad, United States Olympic Committee folk said they knew nothing of her ever being an Olympian, much less being a gold medal winner.

The USOC later sent a representative to

Georgia to determine the validity of Coachman-Davis' claim. They discovered that they were in error.

The odd thing about the first black woman Olympic gold medalist is that she won in an event that she wasn't noted for. She was a four-time AAU All-American sprinter in the 50-yard and 100-yard dash and 440-yard relay.

From 1943-1947, she was the national champ in the 50 and she captured the national title in the 100 in 1945 and 1946. It's strange that she was overlooked in the high jump because she ruled that event, taking the national AAU title from 1939-1947.

When the Olympic year rolled around in '48, people were shocked that she would only compete in the high jump. At that time, Coachman didn't feel well enough physically to participate in the sprints so she didn't compete in the Olympic Trials to earn a spot on the U.S. team in those events.

"My peak years as a runner for the Olympics were 1940 and 1944," Coachman-Davis explained. "But of course there were no Games then because of World War II. By the time the next Olympics were held, I was 25. I had already won a lot of championships and I figured that my best chance for the gold medal was in the high jump."

During the Olympic competition, Coachman's opponents gave her the sincerest form of flattery. They copied her style by attempting to copy her approach to the bar, taking the same number of strides, and believing that they could duplicate her success.

It didn't work, especially when the bar was moved to 5-2, which is akin to 6-5 in



Photo by Max Dunhill

**Lash discovered Coachman's skills as a high school teen-ager and played an integral role in her development.**

women's competition these days.

"Before I left for England, my college coach (Cleve Abbott) told me they would be doing, so I was prepared when I got there. I would pretend to mark off the spot where I was going to start my approach. But what I did was chop my steps so they couldn't tell

fit greatly if exposed to good coaching, he approached Abbott about having her come to Tuskegee Institute. At that time, Tuskegee was both a high school and a college. High school students could run on the college team if they were good enough. Abbott got one glimpse of Coachman-Davis in action and knew he had



Photo by Max Dunhill

**At a Sports Hall of Fame Banquet in Winston-Salem, N.C., Coachman-Davis presented her first coach, Harry Lash with her first gold medal, which she won in 1939 at the AAU National Championships.**

exactly where I started my approach. So that put an end to all of the copying."

Coachman and Great Britain's Sheila Brussels engaged in heavy competition as the height increased. Both women cleared 5-6 1/4, but the Albany State alumna won because she had fewer misses on previous attempts.

The man who "discovered" Coachman is Harry Lash, girls' track coach at Madison High School in Albany. Lash, a graduate of North Carolina A & T, could see greatness written all over Coachman, even as a 16-year old.

Convinced that the youngster could bene-

an athlete with world-class potential.

The two coaches approached Coachman's parents and persuaded them to allow their daughter to attend Tuskegee. The year was 1939. That summer, Coachman entered her first national AAU meet and won her first ever gold medal in the high jump.

"I would never had achieved what I did without Harry Lash," Coachman-Davis is quick to say. "A lot of things he told me stuck with me. Even in London with me going up against the best, I could hear him telling me: 'You can do it. Just have faith and work hard.'"

**- Edward Darby**