INTRODUCTION

A misty rain fell on the spectators gathered at Wembley Stadium in London, England, but the crowd was still strong at 60,000. It was the final day of track and field competition for the XIV Olympiad. Dusk was quickly approaching, but the women's high jump competition was still underway. Two athletes remained, an American by the name of Alice Coachman and the British, hometown favorite, Dorothy Tyler. With an Olympic gold medal on the line, both athletes seemed content to remain all night, if necessary, as they continued to match one other at each succeeding height. But then at 5′ 6 ½″, neither one cleared the bar. The audience waited in the darkening drizzle while the judges conferred to determine who would be crowned the new Olympic champion. Finally, the judges ruled that one of the two athletes had indeed edged out the other through fewer missed attempts on previous heights. Alice Coachman had just become the first African American woman to win an Olympic gold medal. Her leap of 5′ 6-1/8″ on that August evening in 1948 set new Olympic and American records for the women's high jump. The win culminated a virtually unparalleled ten-year career in which she amassed an athletic record of thirty-six track and field national championships—twenty-six individual and ten team titles. From 1939, when she first won the national championship for the high jump at the age of 16, she never surrendered it; a new champion came only after her retirement at the conclusion of the Olympics. While the high jump was her signature event, she also possessed speed. For her prowess as a sprinter, the press dubbed Coachman, "the Tuskegee flash." For five consecutive years in the mid 1940s, her 50-meter sprint titles qualified her as the fastest woman in the United States. In 1943, she was named a member of the first All-American Women's Track and Field Team, continuing that yearly distinction until her retirement in 1948. When she returned from the Olympics to her hometown of Albany, Georgia, blacks and whites came together to celebrate her victory.

And in the early 1950s, she became the first African American woman athlete to acquire a corporate endorsement when she appeared with fellow Olympic track star Jesse Owens in print advertisements for Coca-Cola.

But the glory of being an Olympic champion faded with the passing years and, in time, few people knew of her athletic feats, even in her hometown. Roughly twenty years after winning the gold medal, the extent to which history had been rewritten became shockingly clear. While teaching physical education in her hometown during the 1960s, she gave her students an assignment as they began their unit on the sport—read and report on the history of track and field. One of the students brought in a book that stated Wilma Rudolph was the first African American woman to win an Olympic gold medal. "But Mrs. Davis," her students remarked, "we thought you said you were the first." Coachman had spoken with them in the past about her Olympic experience. She informed them that the book was incorrect, but they remained skeptical. Reminiscing about the incident years later, she recalled that the only way to convince them was to bring her gold medal into class the following day.

This is the story of African American women's relationship with competitive sport during the twentieth century. It is a relationship that allowed athletically talented black women, many of them from poor backgrounds, to attend college, travel and experience life in ways that otherwise would have been unknown to them. It is a relationship that fostered widespread support and acclaim from members of the black community. And it is a relationship in which the athletes confronted and challenged contemporary perceptions of what it meant to be a woman and black in American society, and what it meant—both in white society and the black community—to be at the forefront of the struggle for civil rights.