

The Clerk's Black History Series

Debra DeBerry
Clerk of Superior Court
DeKalb County



Alice Coachman Davis

(November 9, 1923 – July 14, 2014)

“First African-American Woman to Win an Olympic Gold Medal”

Alice Coachman was born November 9, 1923 in Albany, Georgia. The fifth of ten children, Alice discovered her love of running and jumping at an early age. Living in the heart of the segregated South made it almost impossible for Alice to utilize local athletic training facilities, in addition to being female during a time of widespread opposition to women in sports. Alice ran on the dirt roads near her house and used whatever she could find, old equipment and homemade hurdles, to practice jumping. Her parents were not initially supportive of her athletic activities. That changed in 1939 while still in High School, Alice broke the Amateur Athletic Union (AAU) high school and college women's high-jump records, all while barefoot. From there, she continued to dominate the AAU outdoor high jump championship from 1939 through 1948, winning ten national championships in a row. During the same period, Alice also won three conference championships playing as a guard on the Tuskegee women's basketball team. Although she was in her prime athletically, she was not able to compete in the 1940 and 1944 Olympic Games due to World War II.



However, in 1948, the little girl that used to run barefoot on dirt roads, added her name to the history books when she participated in the London Olympic Games representing the United States. Initially she qualified for the US Olympic team with a high jump of 5 feet 4 inches, breaking the previous 16-year-old record by $\frac{3}{4}$ of an inch. But on the last day of the women's track and field event, on a rainy London track and in front of nearly 83,000 spectators, Alice cleared the bar at an unprecedented 5 feet, 6 $\frac{1}{8}$ inches. Although her competitor cleared the same height after several tries, Alice cleared the height with her first jump, and was declared the winner. Her gold medal was not just the first to be won by a black woman – she was also the only American woman to win a gold medal at the 1948 Games. She received her medal from King George VI, returning home to the city of Albany a hero. The town held “Alice Coachman Day” with a 175-mile motorcade where she was cheered by black and white supporters alike. After the fanfare settled down, Alice finished her degree at Albany State and later became a teacher. In 1952, the Coca-Cola Company offered her an endorsement deal, making her the first African-American spokesperson for the company.



In 1975, Alice Coachman was inducted into the National Track & Field Hall of Fame and was honored as one of the 100 greatest Olympians in history at the 1996 Summer Olympic Games in Atlanta. She was inducted into a total of nine different halls of fame, including the U.S. Olympic Hall of Fame. In 1999 Alice Coachman Elementary School opened its doors in her home town of Albany, Georgia.

Alice Coachman died on July 14, 2014 in Georgia after suffering a stroke. She was 90 years old.