

Althea Gibson

Date of Birth: 25th August 1927
Spouse: Will Darben (1965-1976-divorced); Sydney Llewellyn (1983-1988-divorced)
Date of Death: 28 September 2003 (Age 76)



Althea Gibson

Photo: World Telegram & Sun photo by Fred Palumbo

Athletic Achievements

- 1951 became the first black competitor at Wimbledon, won her first International Title, the Caribbean Championships in Jamaica
- 1956 First African American to win the Grand Slam Title in the French Championships.
- 1957 Achieved finals in 8 grand slam events. Won: Wimbledon and US National Singles, Wimbledon and Australian Doubles. Finished second: Australian Singles, US Doubles, and Wimbledon Mixed doubles.
- 1958 She won Wimbledon Singles and doubles; US National Singles
- 1964 She was the first African-American woman to join the Ladies Professional Golf Association.

Biography

Althea Gibson was a world renown tennis player, the first black to compete at the international level. Among her many achievements, she was the first African-American to win the Grand Slam title in the French Open in 1956 and went on in 1957 and 1958 to win both the Wimbledon and US Nationals. In the end she won 11 Grand Slam tournaments: five for singles, five for doubles, and one mixed doubles titles. She overcame numerous racial barriers, both social and structural to become one of the best tennis players ever. Ms. Gibson also broke the racial barrier in golf, becoming the first black woman to compete professionally in golf. She inspired many other black athletes to follow in her footsteps.

In 1951, she won her first international title by winning the Caribbean Championships in Jamaica. Later that year, she also became the first black competitor at Wimbledon. In 1955, she was sent on a goodwill tour in Asia to play in exhibition matches. When that tour finished, she continued to travel abroad to play in tournaments, winning 16 out of the 18 tournaments she competed in (Benson, 2006).

In 1956 she was the first African-American to win a grand slam tournament, winning both the singles and doubles event at the French Championships. She went on to win doubles event at Wimbledon, the Italian Championships in Rome, the Indian Championships in New Delhi, and the Asian Championship. She also reached the quarterfinals in singles at Wimbledon and the finals at the US nationals.

Althea Gibson became the first black champion at Wimbledon in 1957. She also won doubles again, and was the first champion to receive her trophy from Queen Elizabeth II. Later that year, she won her first National Championship, a win she valued even more than winning at Wimbledon. In

all, in 1957, she won 8 Grand slam events.

In 1958, Ms. Gibson successfully defended both her Wimbledon and US National singles titles and won the Wimbledon doubles for the third year running. For both 1957 and 1958 She was ranked number one for women both in the US and internationally, was named the Female Athlete of the Year. She also became the first black woman to appear on the covers of Sports Illustrated and Time Magazines.

Frustrated by the limited financial opportunities despite her incredible success in tournaments, in 1964, at the age of 37, Althea Gibson turned to playing professional golf. She was the first African-American woman to join the Ladies Professional Golf Association. In the 1970s, she retired from playing professionally and became involved with supporting and promoting athletic activities, particularly in lower income, urban environments.

After almost two decades of health issues, Ms. Gibson died on 28 September, at the age of 76, from complications from infections. Her legacy lives on and she continues to be a great example of achievement and tenacity. She inspired other minority players by proving that an African-American woman, given the opportunity, could not just compete at the top level in the world, but win.

Reading List

- Benson, M. (2006). Althea Gibson: Tennis player. New York: Ferguson.
- Gormley, B., & Henderson, M. (2005). Althea Gibson: Young tennis player. New York: Aladdin Paperbacks.
- Jackson, T. W. (2016). Women in Black history: Stories of courage, faith, and resilience. Grand Rapids, MI: Revell.