

Althea gibson: equality in tennis



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The Demand for Equality

Althea Gibson was a revolutionary force in Tennis, which at the time was an elite sport that was saturated mainly by only white and mostly male players for several generations. Gibson's incredible legacy took on a new life as seen in the careers of sisters Venus and Serena Williams comparatively. Gibson, who grew up in Harlem, experienced much discrimination as she began to rise to the top of the ranks in the tennis scene. This was mainly due to the fact that the vast majority of the nation was still very deeply segregated in the 40s and 50s. Being raised in desperate and impoverished conditions in the rough New York borough of Harlem- with her grit, steadfastness, and unabashed candor- Gibson changed the game of tennis as it was once known.

Gibson turned out to be the first Black tennis champion to receive recognition globally in the height of an era where sexism and racial discrimination were plentiful, and because of which, many times this would force Gibson to sleep in her vehicle while she was on her tournament route. When Dr. Robert Johnson, known as "The Black Godfather of Tennis" asked Althea if she would be interested in playing the US National Championship Forest Hills, "...the Mecca of American tennis and national championships... and of course, when she heard that she thought these guys are either snake oil salesmen or some kind of charlatans...no way that that was going to be possible given the social backdrop and landscape at the time." (Althea, 2015)

Althea was determined, aggressive, stubborn and she never gave up.

Consequentially, she attained status as the first black female to ever have won The Wimbledon Cup. At this time during the 1950s, segregation was rife worldwide, and despite winning numerous titles, Gibson would still be denied patronage in certain hotels and unwelcome in restaurants. However, her pioneering achievements in this manner paved the path for other African American athletes such as and Venus and Serena Williams. She was a predecessor for the Williams sisters by nearly 40 years, but the Williams sisters still have to cope with some of the same racial biases, stereotypes, and gender inequality that Althea had to deal with in her time as an athlete under the proverbial spotlight. “ Nearly two thousand spectators jammed in the stands and the Pinkertons had to close the gates. Among the spectators were hecklers shouting ‘ Beat the ni**er!’ Althea blocked them out...”

(Althea, 2014) . Similarly, Serena Williams also has had to deal with discrimination in the face of her success. In an excerpt comparing the pay discrepancy of male to female tennis players, the author of the article Tennis is a White Man’s Sport asserts that: “ Williams has won 23 grand slams, yet somehow has career winnings of approximately \$30 million less than Roger Federer—a white man with 20 grand slams .” (Leon, 2018). Additionally, an excerpt from the online Vox article The Serena Williams Cat Suit Ban Shows That Tennis Can’t Get Past its Elitist Roots cites that “ For 14 years, Serena Williams boycotted the Indian Wells tournament...[she was] also subjected to n-word taunts. One man even remarked, ‘ I wish it was ’75; we’d skin you alive,’ ... Indian Wells is hardly the only event where she’s faced bigotry.” (Nittle, 2018)

Although her younger sister Serena was the first Williams to win a Grand Slam singles title during the 1999 U. S. Open, Venus also emerged at the top of her game in 2000, winning her first Slam–Wimbledon–and going on to win the U. S. Open as well as an Olympic gold medal. Over the next decade, the extraordinary power and athleticism of the Williams sisters was credited with bringing the women’s tennis game to an all new level, and final-round match-ups between these two sisters were increasingly more common at Grand Slam events.

The accomplishments of the Williams sisters are indeed extremely significant; but in comparison to Gibson’s accomplishments in the societal reform her success helped bring about, they pale in comparison to the achievements which Gibson had initially obtained. Althea Gibson won an astonishing fifty-six singles and doubles titles during the 1950s while she was still considered to be an amateur in the sport, and went on to win another ten major titles after she won the French Championship in 1956. At the end of her career, Althea became inducted into the International Scholar-Athletes Hall of Fame, the International Women’s Sports Hall of Fame, and most impressively, the International Tennis Hall of Fame, only to name a few. High hopes were now set for all African-American female tennis athletes after Gibson secured the win at Wimbledon, but it took nearly 40 more years for the next such successor to come forth. This athlete was Venus Williams. Venus won her initial of what was an incredible five singles titles at Wimbelton in the year 2000. Shortly thereafter, Serena Williams also won the title of Wimbledon’s ladies’ singles championships both in 2002 as well as 2003. It is important to note that by the time Venus and Serena Williams

made it to the Final in 2008 at Wimbledon, there were many more critics and fans of the sisters who noted the astonishing athletic accolades the sisters had obtained, while the win was less so noted as being a particularly influential milestone for race and gender equality within the sports world.

After Gibson had passed away, the two most famous sisters of female tennis paid tribute to the legend. Venus Williams is quoted in an article titled Remembering Althea Gibson as she delivered this message wherein she honored her tennis idol saying: " I am grateful to Althea Gibson for having the strength and courage to break through the racial barriers in tennis [...] I am honored to have followed in such great footsteps." Likewise, her sister Serena reaffirmed this idea saying: " Althea set an example. I know every time I step out on the court I play for me and I play for all the other little African American kids out there who have a dream and who might not have the means." Gibson was a gift to all of humanity, and she set an exquisite example for Venus and Serena. Althea had done the work and paved the way for future athletes so that their performance could be recognized and praised as opposed to their race and legitimacy or ability being called into question as was the norm at the time for Althea. As Gibson so poignantly said, " No matter what accomplishments you make, someone helped you." (Althea, 2015).

Citations:

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