

Alice Coachman

From hard times to great heights

First Black woman in history to win Olympic gold

1923-2014

Athlete

Champion

Trailblazer



Early Life

The 1920's to 30's in Georgia proved to be a period marked by suffering. In the 1920's, the Boll weevil, a type of beetle, decimated the cotton crops which were a large part of the economy in the American South.

The agricultural fallout was exacerbated by the Great Depression in the 1930's, forcing the majority of sharecroppers, many of whom were Black, into economic poverty and uncertainty.

It was into these tumultuous times that **Alice Marie Coachman** was born in Albany, Georgia, on November 9, 1923. She was one of ten children born to Fred and Evelyn Coachman.



USDA Poster circa 1919.

Irrepressible Talent

From childhood, Alice had a passion and talent for anything involving athletics. Alice loved to run and play sports with the boys in her neighborhood, but when her father caught her participating in these physical activities, he would punish her for not following the typical gender norms of the time. Still, against her parent's desires, Coachman practiced in secret.

"Back then," she told William C. Rhoden of the New York Times in 1995, "there was the sense that women weren't supposed to be running like that. My father wanted his girls to be dainty, sitting on the front porch."

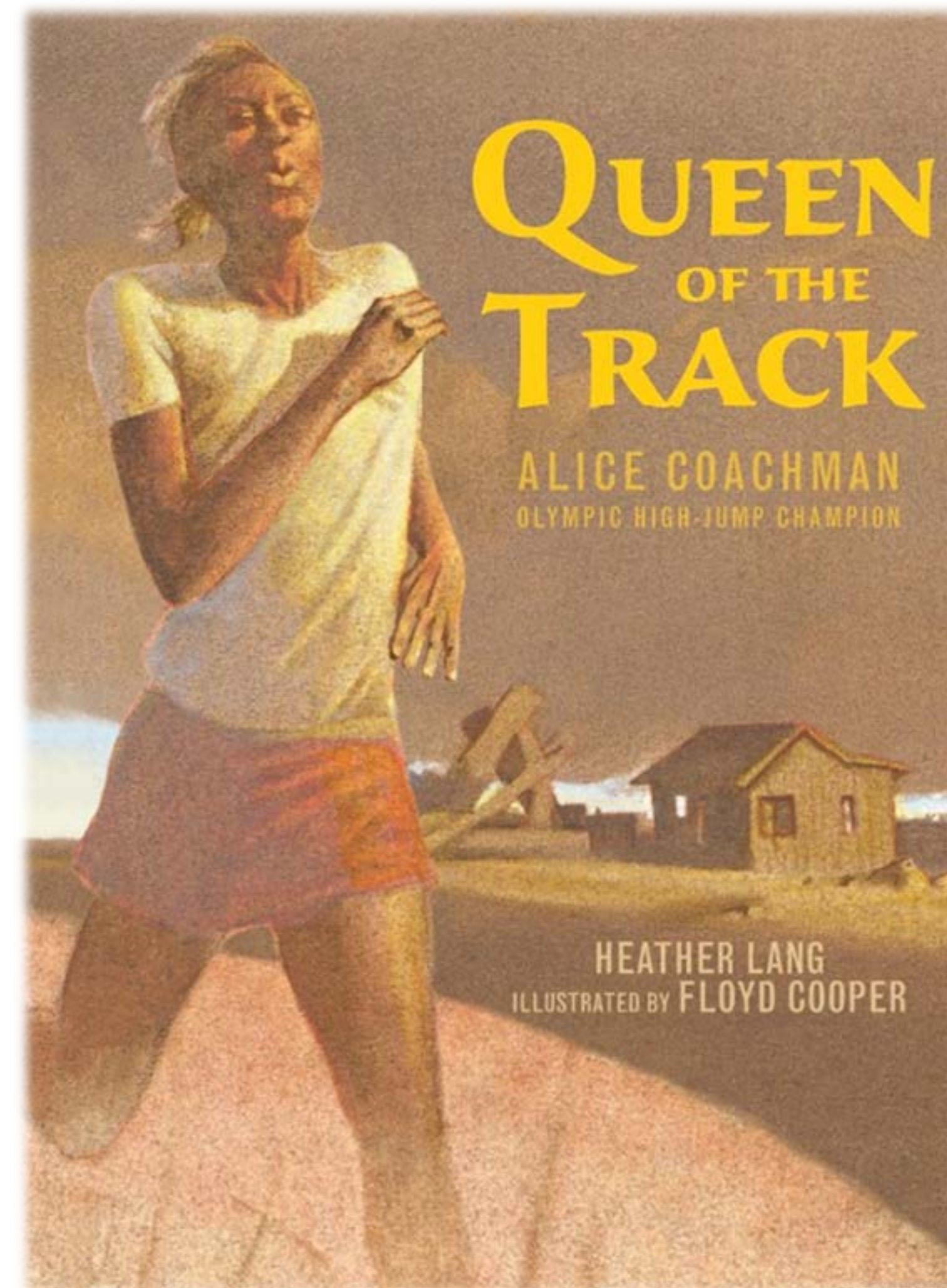
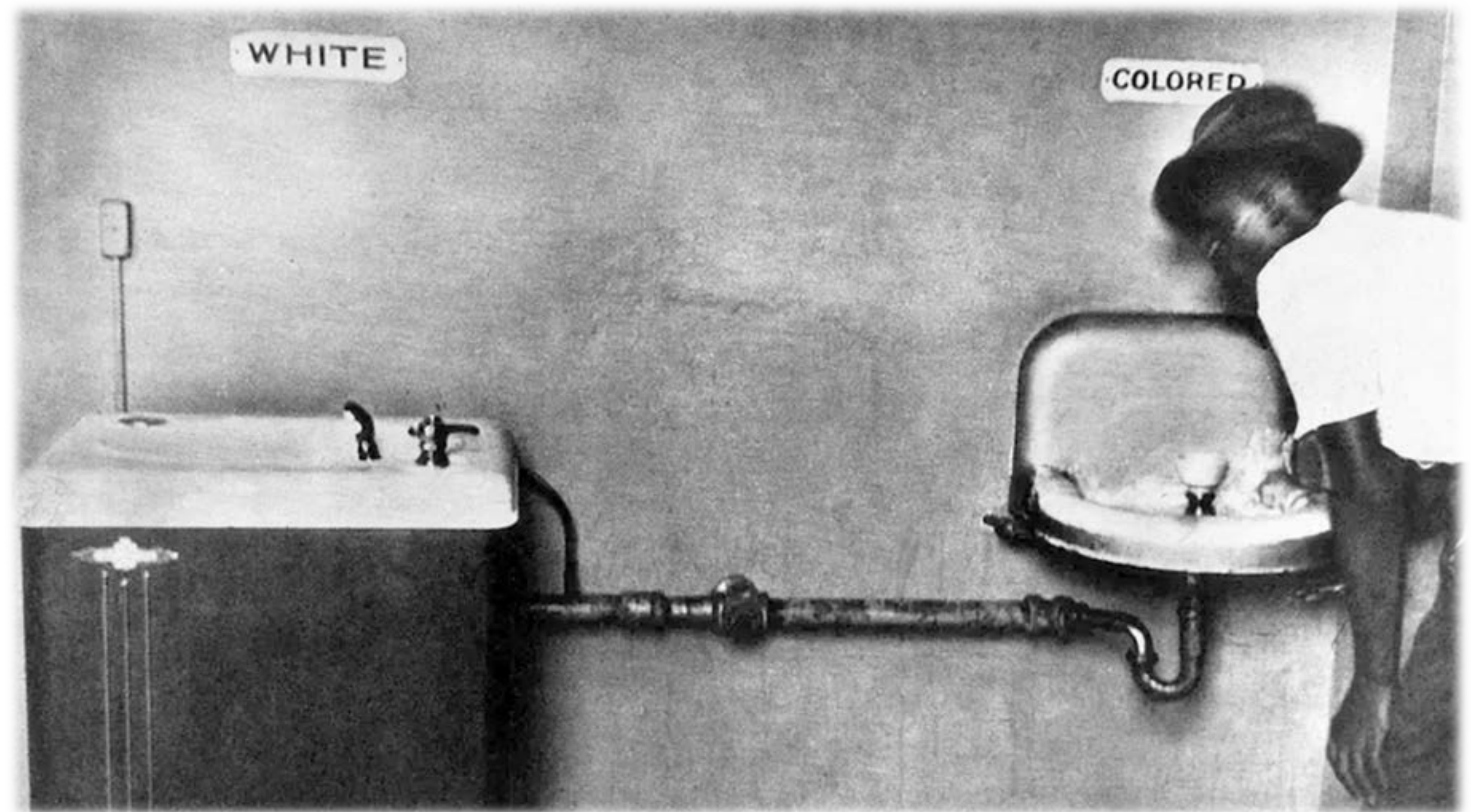


Image from the book *Queen of the Track: Alice Coachman, Olympic High-Jump Champion*, written by Heather Lang and illustrated by Floyd Cooper.

Overcoming barriers...

Coachman faced not only gender obstacles but also a hostile racial environment. For example, because of strict segregation laws, young athletes of color in southern schools were excluded from all public training facilities and organized sports events.

Photo of a young man drinking from a segregated water fountain in North Carolina, 1938.



... and opening new doors

Despite these barriers, Coachman continued to develop her athletic prowess, as she would run barefoot on the dirt roads near her house.

Coachman was also resourceful, as she would practice for hours, jumping over a crossbar made of rags tied together.

Image from the book *Touch the Sky: Alice Coachman, Olympic High Jumper*, written by Ann Malaspina and illustrated by Eric Velasquez.



Dedicated helpers



Coachman didn't overcome the odds all on her own. She had several people who advocated on her behalf at critical moments.

It was people like Cora Bailey, her fifth-grade teacher, and her aunt, Carrie Spry, who convinced Coachman's parents to reconsider their qualms about her potential athletics career.

In 1938, Harry E. Lash, Madison High School's track coach, helped develop and refine Coachman's raw talent.

Smashing records without shoes!

In 1939, in the summer before her first official semester in college, Coachman entered the Women's National Championships and broke both the collegiate and national high jump records.

What made this victory more impressive is that Coachman did all her events ***barefoot!***



Image courtesy of Shutterstock.



On to college

At just age 16, Coachman accepted a scholarship and transferred to the Tuskegee Institute, where she began to gain national recognition for her athletic ability.



Under the leadership of its first president, Booker T. Washington (1881-1915), the Tuskegee Institute (now Tuskegee University) became one of the most influential institutions now referred to as “Historically Black Colleges and Universities” (HBCUs).



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HBCUs are institutions of higher education that were established with the intention of primarily serving the African-American community. Most of these institutions were founded after the Civil War and are concentrated in the southern United States.

A great coach at Tuskegee Institute



At Tuskegee Institute, Alice was coached by the legendary Cleveland "Cleve" Abbot, who was hired by Booker T. Washington to become both a classroom teacher and director of the Tuskegee athletics program in 1915.

Abbott's influence on Coachman and the overall school's success cannot be overstated. In his 32-year storied career, the Tuskegee football team won nine national titles and went 203-96; in women's track, Tuskegee won 14 national championships and a half dozen competed in the Olympics. Today, he is widely remembered as a pioneering force in developing women's track and field in the USA.



Multi-sport national champion

Under Abbot's guidance, Coachman would go on to capture the Amateur Athletic Union (AAU) high jump championship eight consecutive times (1939 to 1946), and AAU's 50-meter dash four consecutive times (1943 to 1946). She also won national championships in the 100-meter dash and the 4x100-meter relay.

Alice was also a multifaceted athlete, as she was a member of the three-time national champion Tuskegee Women's basketball team.



Alice Coachman is on the far right in this photo with the Tuskegee relay team.

Multi-sport national champion

After graduating from Tuskegee in 1946, Alice enrolled at Albany State College to further her education.

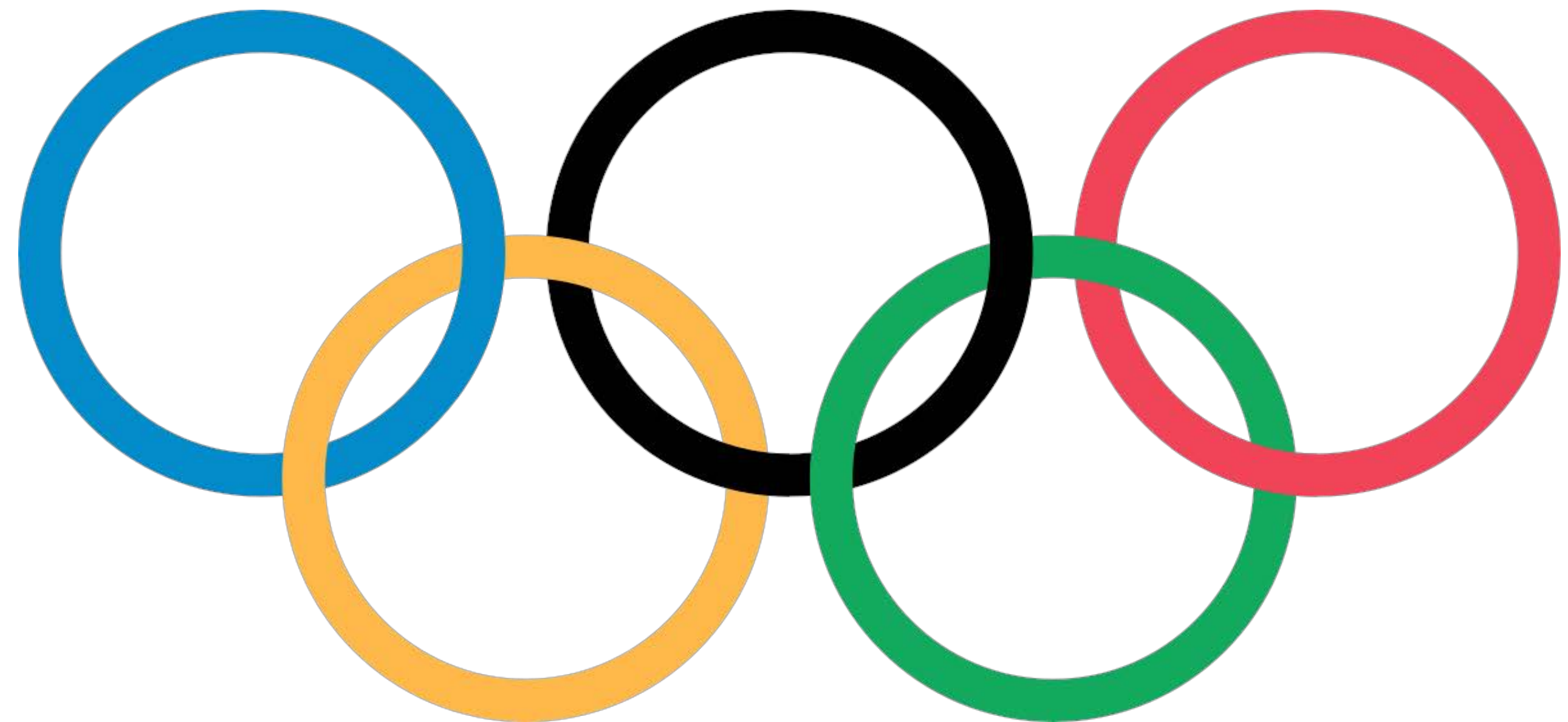
She continued to compete at a high level and won both the AAU high jump championship and the 50-meter dash in 1946-1947. In total, Alice held 25 national titles, cementing her status as a college track legend.



Ready for the Olympics — on the world stage

You probably know that the Olympics are held every four years.

Did you know that there were no Olympics held in 1940 or 1944?
Can you guess why?



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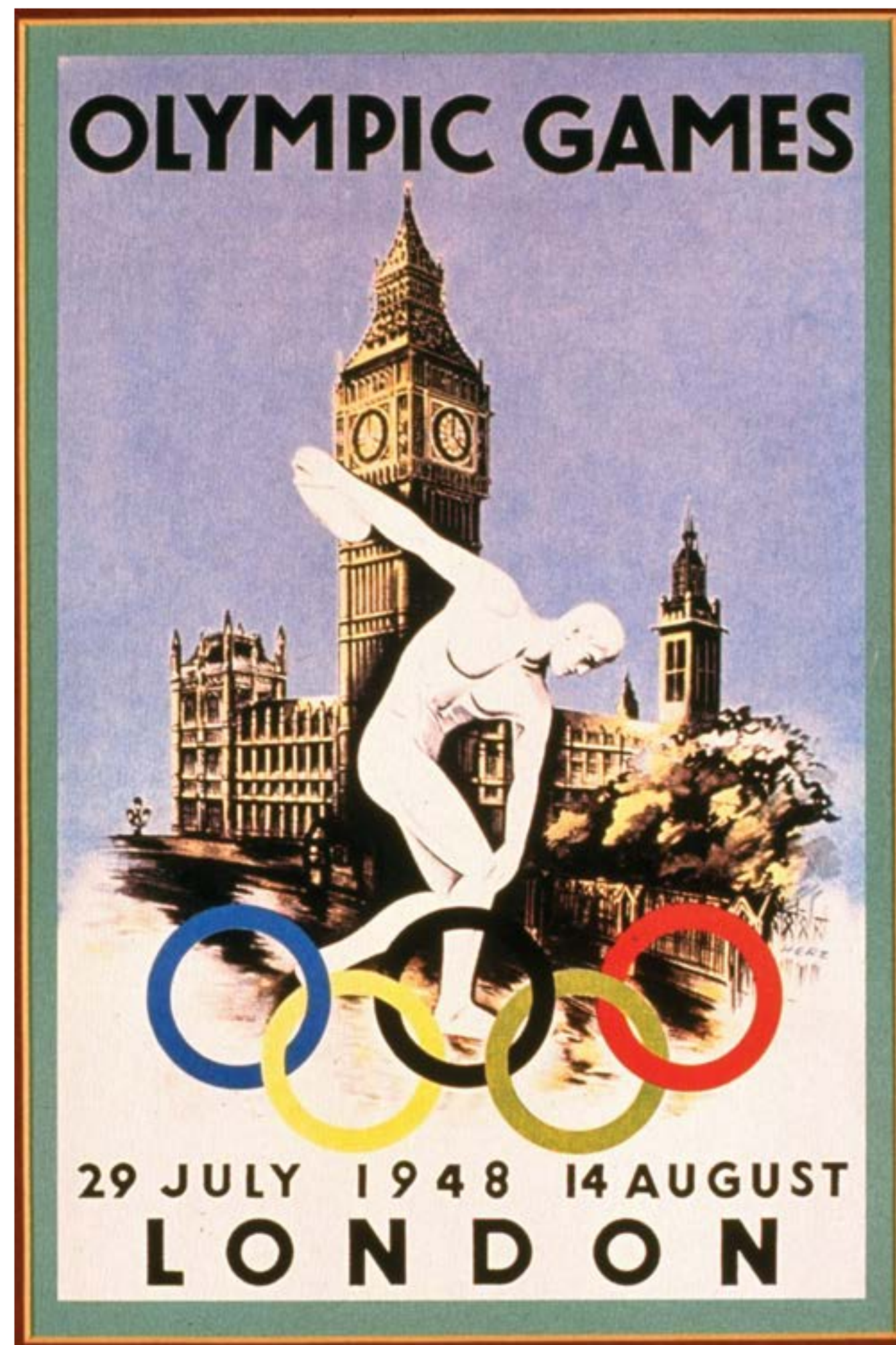
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The Olympics were cancelled in those years due to World War II. They were supposed to be held in Tokyo, Japan (in 1940) and London, England (in 1944). It is quite likely Coachman would have placed in the 1940 and 1944 Olympics, had they been held.

They were also cancelled in 1916 in Berlin, Germany during World War I and were *postponed* in 2020, again in Tokyo, due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

FINALLY: The 1948 Olympics!



This meant that Alice missed not just one, but TWO opportunities to showcase her talent and receive well-deserved recognition. But she didn't give up.

It was only in 1948 that Coachman was finally able to compete in the high jump and establish her name among the best athletes from around the world.

Because the world was recovering from the devastation of World War II, the 1948 London Olympiad was known as the "Austerity Games." It was also the first Olympics to broadcast events on television. Most were excited just to come together and to move past dark times.



The 1948 Olympics

There was immense pressure on Alice Coachman to deliver a medal.

Her preparation method was unusual. Instead of practicing the day before, she said later:



“I don’t work out the day before a meet ... I was talking to the man above, telling him, ‘If it’s your will, let it be done.’ ” Coachman also prepared by sucking a lemon rather than drinking water, saying later: *“It helped me when my mouth was dry. I liked to feel light so I didn’t drink water in competition.”*

Olympic Champion

The high jump competition proved to be a nail-biter, as both Dorothy Tyler of Britain and Coachman cleared 5 feet 6 ⅛ inches. However, because Coachman cleared her distance on her first try while Tyler cleared it only on her second, Coachman won the tie-breaker and was declared winner.

This achievement made Alice Coachman *the first Black woman in the world to win the Olympic gold medal.*



Olympic Champion

Coachman was one of many Olympic athletes of color to be welcomed at The White House by President Harry S. Truman.

President Harry S. Truman stands with a group of African-American Olympic athletes in the Oval Office in 1948. Alice Coachman is second from the right.



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However, even at the celebration for her victory back home in Georgia, the era's state-sanctioned racism reared its ugly head. The Sunday Times reported in 2012:

"When [Coachman] reached Atlanta in Georgia she was welcomed along the roads stretching almost 180 miles to Albany, where a civic celebration was held. She was congratulated by the mayor but he did not shake her hand. Neither did she speak publicly."

Coachman recalled many years later:
"That was the way it was in 1948."



After the Olympics

Alice returned to Albany State College to finish her degree, graduating in 1949.

In 1952, Coachman became the first African American woman to earn an endorsement deal as she partnered with Coca-Cola to become a spokesperson!



Alice Coachman is pictured in this Coca-Cola advertisement with another famous African-American Olympian, Jesse Owens.

After the Olympics

At the 1996 Summer Olympic Games in Atlanta, Coachman was honored as one of the 100 greatest Olympians in history.

She's also been inducted into nine different halls of fame, including the National Track & Field Hall of Fame (1975) and the U.S. Olympic Hall of Fame (2004).





Paving the path for others

Although Coachman lived a quiet, humble life out of the spotlight after her athletic career, her legacy still reverberates throughout women's sports and the wider world of Track & Field today.

She was a trailblazer who led the way for future African-American and female athletes and created the Alice Coachman Track and Field Foundation to aid young athletes and former competitors in financial need.

Alice once said: *"I have always believed that I could do whatever I set my mind to do."*



Vocabulary

Exacerbated
Sharecropper
Irrepressible
Segregation
Prowess
Resourceful
Advocate
Pioneering
Multifaceted
Austerity
Endorsement
Reverberate
Trailblazer





WOODSONCENTER