



ALTHEA GIBSON

Tennis, which first came to the United States in the late 19th century, by the middle of the 20th century had become part of a culture of health and fitness. Public programs brought tennis to children in poor neighbourhoods, though those children couldn't dream of playing in the elite tennis clubs.

One young girl named Althea Gibson lived in Harlem in the 1930s and 1940s. Her family was on welfare. She was a client of the Society for Prevention of Cruelty to Children. She had trouble in school and was often truant. She ran away from home frequently. .

She also played paddle tennis in public recreation programs. Her talent and interest in the game led her to win tournaments sponsored by the Police Athletic Leagues and the Parks Department. Musician Buddy Walker noticed her playing table tennis, and thought she might do well in tennis. He brought her to the Harlem River Tennis Courts, where she learned the game and began to excel.

The young Althea Gibson became a member of the Harlem Cosmopolitan Tennis Club, a club for African American players, through donations raised for her membership and lessons. By 1942 Gibson had won the girls' singles event at the American Tennis Association's New York State Tournament. (The American Tennis Association - ATA - was an all-black organization, providing tournament opportunities not otherwise available to African American tennis players.) In 1944 and 1945 she again won ATA tournaments.

Then Gibson was offered an opportunity to develop her talents more fully: a wealthy South Carolina businessman opened his home to her and supported her in attending an industrial high school, while studying tennis privately. From 1950, she furthered her education, attending Florida A&M University, where she graduated in 1953. Then, in 1953, she became an athletic instructor at Lincoln University in Jefferson City, Missouri.

Gibson won the ATA women's singles tournament ten years in a row, 1947 through 1956. But tennis tournaments outside the ATA remained closed to her, until 1950. In that year white tennis player Alice Marble wrote an article in *American Lawn Tennis* magazine, noting that this excellent player was not able to participate in the better-known championships, for no reason other than "bigotry."

And so later that year, Althea Gibson entered the Forest Hills, New York, national grass court championship, the first African American player of either sex to be allowed to enter.

Gibson then became the first African American invited to enter the all-England tournament at Wimbledon, playing there in 1951. She entered other tournaments, though at first winning only minor titles outside the ATA. In 1956, she won the French Open. In the same year, she toured worldwide as a member of a national tennis team supported by the U.S. State Department.

She began winning more tournaments, including at the Wimbledon women's doubles. In 1957 she won the women's singles *and* doubles at Wimbledon. In celebration of this American win -- and her achievement as an African American -- New York City greeted her with a ticker tape parade. Gibson followed up with a win at Forest Hills in the women's singles tournament.

In 1958 she again won both Wimbledon titles and repeated the Forest Hills women's singles win. Her autobiography, *I Always Wanted to Be Somebody*, came out in 1958. In 1959 she turned pro, winning the women's professional singles title in 1960. She also began playing professional women's golf and she appeared in several films.

Althea Gibson served from 1973 on in various national and New Jersey positions in tennis and recreation. Among her honours:

- 1971 - National Lawn Tennis Hall of Fame
- 1971 - International Tennis Hall of Fame
- 1974 - Black Athletes Hall of Fame
- 1983 - South Carolina Hall of Fame
- 1984 - Florida Sports Hall of Fame






In the mid 1990s, Althea Gibson suffered from serious health problems including a stroke, and also struggled financially though many efforts at fund-raising helped ease that

burden. She died on Sunday, September 28, 2003, but not before she knew of the tennis victories of Serena and Venus Williams.

Other African American tennis players like Arthur Ashe and the Williams sisters followed Gibson, though not quickly. Althea Gibson's achievement was unique, as the first African American of either sex to break the colour bar in national and international tournament tennis at a time when prejudice and racism were far more pervasive in society and sports.

Grand Slam finals

Wins (5)

Year	Championship	Opponent in Final	Score in Final
1956	French Championships	 Angela Mortimer Barrett	6–0, 12–10
1957	Wimbledon	 Darlene Hard	6–3, 6–2
1957	U.S. Championships	 Louise Brough Clapp	6–3, 6–2
1958	Wimbledon (2)	 Angela Mortimer Barrett	8–6, 6–2
1958	U.S. Championships (2)	 Darlene Hard	3–6, 6–1, 6–2