

## *Excerpt from: Track & Field Self-Guided Workouts: Motivation and Activities*

### **Alice Coachman: African American Pioneer**

Alice Coachman became the first black woman of any nationality to win a gold medal at the Olympics with her victory in the high jump at the 1948 Summer Games in London. Alice was born as the middle child to a family of 10 children in rural Georgia. Because her parents were poor, Alice had to pick cotton to help her family meet expenses while she was in elementary school. She liked to run, but her father would whip her when he caught her running because, “women weren't supposed to be running like that.” But secretly, Alice continued to practice. Unable to afford shoes, she ran barefoot on the dirt roads near her house, practicing jumps over a crossbar made of rags tied together. Eventually, her parents, although still reluctant, allowed her to compete in track and field to improve her raw talent. She broke high school and then collegiate records by the time she was 16 years old.

Alice's biggest goal was to compete in the Olympic Games in 1940. But World War II forced the cancellation of the 1940 and 1944 Olympic Games. Alice became the U.S. national high jump champion and the first African American woman selected for a U.S. Olympic team. On August 7, 1948, at age 25, Alice made history by becoming the first woman of African descent to win an Olympic gold medal. The high jump competition came down to D.J. Tyler of England and Alice, with both jumping an Olympic record 5-61/4; however, Alice won with the least number of misses.

Alice became the first African American woman to endorse an international product when the Coca-Cola Company featured her prominently on billboards along America's highways. Alice Coachman's Olympic gold medal paved the way for generations of African American athletes to achieve great success.

### **Questions for Thought:**

1. Alice ran barefoot and practiced with a cross bar made of rags. How are some ways you have improvised to get the job done?
2. Do you feel it is a privilege or a right to participate in sports?
3. Women were not supposed to be running during Alice's era. What would you do if the right to participate in athletics was taken away from you?

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