INTRODUCTION

A misty rain fell on the spectators gathered at Wembley Stadium in London, England, but the crowd was still strong at 60,000. It was the final day of track and field competition for the XIV Olympiad. Dusk was quickly approaching, but the women's high jump competition was still underway. Two athletes remained, an American by the name of Alice Coachman and the British, hometown favorite, Dorothy Tyler. With an Olympic gold medal on the line, both athletes seemed content to remain all night, if necessary, as they continued to match each other at height after height. But then at 5′6½″, neither one cleared the bar. The audience waited in the darkening drizzle while the judges conferred to determine who would be crowned the new Olympic champion. Finally, the judges ruled that one of the two athletes had indeed edged out the other through fewer missed attempts on previous heights. Alice Coachman had just become the first African American woman to win an Olympic gold medal. Her leap of 5′6⅛″ on that August evening in 1948 set new Olympic and American records for the women's high jump. The win culminated a virtually unparalleled ten-year career in which she amassed an athletic record of thirty-six track and field national championships—twenty-six individual and ten team titles. From 1939, when she first won the national championship for the high jump at the age of sixteen, she never surrendered it; a new champion came only after her retirement at the conclusion of the Olympics. While the high jump was her signature event—"a spectacular leap" that led to her 1941 victory just one of ten consecutive national titles—she also possessed speed.[1] For her prowess as a sprinter, the press dubbed Coachman, "the Tuskegee flash." For five consecutive years in the mid-1940s, her 50-meter sprint titles qualified her as the fastest woman in the United States. In 1943, she was named a member of the first All-American Women's Track and Field Team, continuing that yearly distinction until her retirement in 1948. When she returned from the Olympics to her hometown of Albany, Georgia, blacks

and whites came together to celebrate her victory. And in the early 1950s, she became the first African American woman athlete to acquire a corporate endorsement when she appeared with fellow Olympic track star Jesse Owens in print advertisements for Coca-Cola.

But the glory of being an Olympic champion faded with the passing years and, in time, few people knew of her athletic feats, even in her hometown. Roughly twenty years after winning the gold medal, the extent to which history had been rewritten became shockingly clear. While teaching physical education in her hometown during the 1960s, she gave her students an assignment as they began their unit on the sport—read and report on the history of track and field. One of the students brought in a book that stated Wilma Rudolph was the first African American woman to win an Olympic gold medal. "But Mrs. Davis," her students remarked, "we thought you said you were the first." Coachman had spoken with them in the past about her Olympic experience. She informed them that the book was incorrect, but they remained skeptical. Reminiscing about the incident years later, she recalled that the only way to convince them was to bring her gold medal into class the following day.[2]

This is the story of African American women's relationship with competitive sport during the twentieth century. It is a relationship that allowed athletically talented black women, many of them from poor backgrounds, to attend college, travel, and experience life in ways that otherwise would have been unknown to them. It is a relationship that fostered widespread support and acclaim from members of the black community. And it is a relationship in which the athletes confronted and challenged contemporary perceptions of what it meant to be a woman and black in American society, and what it meant—both in white society and the black community—to be at the forefront of the struggle for civil rights.

When African American women began playing competitive sport in the 1920s, they did so through the support of their own, segregated communities. These communities often saw sport as a vehicle for both teamwork and competition, as well as individual and collective achievement in the face of a dominant white society. Coaches and mentors, neighbors, friends, entrepreneurs, and patrons collectively discovered young women who were athletically gifted and then developed a path for them to train and compete. Sometimes there was conflict about what was best for the

athletes versus the community; nevertheless, high school girls received strong support from black communities whose goal was to help them succeed. And succeed they did, in track and field, tennis, and basketball. Black businesses sponsored industrial teams, establishing leagues for women to compete. Programs in high schools and historically black colleges and universities allowed for training and competition, enabling black women to explore their athletic talent. Black coaches scoured surrounding states for talented high school girls, and suddenly poor rural and working-class women found their route to college through competitive sport and work-study programs. College meant both advanced education and national and international travel as competition opportunities opened up at home and abroad. And as black women athletes competed against whites, they brought home national championships and Olympic medals. This pattern of community support and athletic success played out repeatedly over the decades of the twentieth century.

Black women's experience with sport was far from idyllic, however, often mirroring those of their white counterparts. Throughout the twentieth century, women athletes had to navigate stereotypes about their femininity, sexuality, and economic standing.[3] Sport was the playground for men, really always had been. As far back as the ancient Greek Olympics, women had been excluded from participating in, even watching, sporting events, and the modern world was not terribly different. When U.S. women did begin to play sports in the late nineteenth century, Americans questioned which sports they should participate in, how they should participate, what clothing they should wear, and whether competition, in a fashion similar to men, was appropriate for the "fair sex." Class identity combined with gender and prevailing notions of femininity to further label and constrain women's relationship with sport. When track and field and basketball became labeled as working-class sports, women who participated were characterized by disparaging gender stereotypes that questioned their femininity. As a sport of the elite, men and women who played tennis had to conform to its rigid social expectations. But for women, gender expectations were bound to class identity as well. Hitting the ball with too much power could result in masculine, working-class labels. In short, black and white women alike who participated in sport were often scrutinized, questioned, challenged, qualified, and even ridiculed by white society.

What African American women athletes had to contend with that

white women did not were race and racism.[4] This may seem like an obvious statement, but it changed the dynamic of their relationship with sport in dramatic ways. These athletes had to deal both with how African Americans perceived them in terms of gender and class and how whites perceived them in terms of race, gender, and class. Race, then, became a defining element for these women among both African Americans and whites. In white society, they sometimes joined with white women athletes to combat common gender stereotypes that suggested that women who played sport were too masculine. In truth, however, race always made a difference. Black women had to contend with racial stereotypes that white women did not, such as the hypersexualized black female or the natural black athlete. Since race was a rallying cry within their own community, gender and class stereotypes persisted on a different level. The question for some within the black community became how to help black women athletes "overcome" their working-class backgrounds and combat gender stereotypes in white society. Excelling in athletic competition was, for many within the black community, significant for the race as a whole. As such, an important, though sometimes conflicted, relationship developed between black women athletes and their mentors, and those within the community who were connected to the broader civil rights campaign. Indeed, the way these women and their mentors navigated racism and racial relationships was one of the most compelling aspects of their careers.

While black women athletes competed, African Americans spent much of the twentieth century writing, marching, boycotting, and struggling to acquire equality under American law. While progress was slow, life in the United States looked very different for a woman of color competing in the 1920s, when black women first came on the African American sporting scene, than for one competing in the 1980s, when black women had been ruling the sport of national track and field for fifty years. Besides changes in the broader society, the world of sport had experienced its own transformation. In 1946, Kenny Washington and Woody Strode broke the thirteen-year exclusion of blacks in the NFL; four years later, Earl Lloyd broke the color barrier in the NBA. But no breakthrough during mid-century had the same impact on sport and society as the one Jackie Robinson made in the national pastime. When Robinson broke the color barrier in major league baseball in 1947, he became the standard against which other sports stories involving African

Americans were compared. His athletic performance, racial pride, and willingness to let racial slurs roll off his back affirmed African American athletic ability, challenged prevailing concepts of racial inferiority, and made at least some whites consider race relations in a new light. White ballplayers refused to play with him. Eventually they became his friends. Managers who had been raised in the South worried that they could not overcome their own prejudice. They did. Teammates, coaches, and managers came to defend him—both his abilities as a ballplayer and his value as an individual. Moreover, he stood as a symbol for African Americans against racial discrimination and prejudice throughout his life. He was a proud black man in a largely segregated, white America, whom whites and blacks alike came to admire and respect. His career and his position in America following his retirement provided a racial context for many within the black community to interpret other advances in sport, including those of African American women.

Throughout their athletic careers, then, black women athletes found themselves at the forefront of the racism that characterized much of the American twentieth century. When they were not pushing back against color barriers, stereotypes, and perceptions of white America, they were often being scrutinized and groomed by black communities that wanted to ensure they were acceptable race representatives. They did not always accept their place as race heroes. Some athletes fell into the role more willingly and naturally than others. Some vocally rejected it, wishing instead that their careers could be acknowledged on nonracial terms. Such rejection could lead the adulation, celebration, and support of black civil rights sport leaders to turn on a dime. Even so, the desire and sheer force of will of black women athletes to compete in a society that marginalized them made a difference over time. The advances were sometimes small. In the 1940s, it was a matter of whether they got noticed in the sports pages of the white newspapers. In another twenty years, however, black women track and field athletes were on their way to becoming "our girls" in the American press. And by the 1980s, they had become a dominant force in the world of U.S. sport, even as they continued to confront gender and racial stereotypes. Their story is one of hard work, resilience, and perseverance in the face of an American society that initially scorned and ignored them, and finally came to accept them, albeit sometimes still in racial terms.

The focus of each chapter in the narrative that follows is an individual athlete, a woman whose combination of dedication, training, athletic skills, and timing resulted in an exceptional career.[5] Ora Washington was a champion tennis player and basketball star in the black community beginning in the late 1920s. When white organizations erected color lines to bar black players, athletes like Washington found athletic opportunities within sporting teams and organizations that African Americans created for themselves. The 1940s and 1950s produced two important black women athletic champions in two very different sports. Track and field was one of the few sports in the country that permitted competition among and between African Americans and whites at the national level. Alice Coachman, the Olympic champion track and field athlete of the 1940s, and women like her, reveled in the opportunity to compete nationally. Althea Gibson was an amateur tennis player of the 1950s who became the first African American Wimbledon and U.S. national champion. She was a natural with a tennis racquet, but she was also a tough, tomboyish black woman from Harlem, a stark contradiction to white tennis society. Sprinter Wilma Rudolph, a track star of the late 1950s and early 1960s, overcame crippling childhood illnesses to become a triple Olympic gold-medal winner. During her time as America's sprint queen, black women track athletes became the United States' best hope to defeat the Russian women in track in a world locked in a bitter Cold War. The racial turbulence of the late 1960s and the rebirth of the women's movement in the 1970s is the backdrop for the story of Wyomia Tyus. A champion sprinter and Olympic gold medalist, her career occurred during a time of profound changes for women and blacks in America. By the 1980s, African Americans were the standard bearers of women's track and field. Raised in the wake of the Title IX legislation that opened up more sporting opportunities for women, Jackie Joyner-Kersee earned the title of "world's greatest female athlete" when she won six Olympic medals and set eight world records. She emerged from the ghetto into a world of international track and field that, with its million-dollar endorsement contracts, looked very different from the sport Alice Coachman, Wilma Rudolph, or Wyomia Tyus competed in.

These are not mini-biographies, nor are they meant to be. But most of the athletes are not well known today, and, therefore, some biographical context is necessary in each chapter. Their individual stories reveal

interesting and complex individuals—their struggles and triumphs; what they accomplished and what they had to give up in the process; the important people and communities that helped them achieve athletic success; and the ways in which they were likable, and sometimes, not so likable. Their stories unveil striking similarities. All of the athletes came from poor beginnings. Many of their childhoods were mixed with pleasant memories and hard times. While their families were intact, the home lives for many of them were not always idyllic. All six were natural athletes and played multiple sports well, with basketball being a common denominator among them all. Strong male mentors often made their educations and athletic careers possible, and many of them received invitations to leave home as teenagers to train elsewhere. For all but one, sport was their vehicle to a college education that probably would have eluded them otherwise. After they retired from sports, most of them struggled with life to varying degrees; they often had a hard time finding steady work despite their athletic fame and college education. And those who had broken racial, gender, or sporting barriers questioned their place or, more accurately, lack of place in American popular culture.

Two of the similarities are particularly striking. First, all of these women used sport as a way to broaden the typical life that lay ahead of rural or working-class African American women of the period. Most poor black women of the first two-thirds of the twentieth century found work in agriculture, service, or industrial sectors.[6] While growing numbers of historically black colleges throughout the country were available to teach trades and provide higher education, many African American families could not afford tuition. Beginning in the 1930s, sport and work-study programs that black colleges like Tuskegee Institute and Tennessee State University extended to gifted athletes became their path to a skilled trade and/or higher education. By the late 1970s, white universities like UCLA were actively recruiting black women athletes and offering full athletic scholarships. Moreover, athletic competition provided travel experiences that many of these women would otherwise have been unable to afford. All the athletes traveled widely, first nationally, and by mid-century, internationally. Second, strong, influential, African American men made possible the athletic and college careers of these athletes. Most often the mentors were coaches, and they guided a number of other young African American women who excelled at sport through the same path. Most of

them viewed sport as a way for their young athletic charges to better themselves, and they not only helped train the athletes but also encouraged them educationally and socially. The relationships between black women athletes and male coaches, mentors, and promoters, then, point to the community nature of betterment efforts within African American society, efforts that could easily cross gender barriers established by the dominant society. At a time when many in white America discouraged women from entering competitive sport, African American men were finding ways and developing programs to give young black women athletes a way to succeed in the sporting world and an opportunity at a better life.

Of course, using the stories of six athletes as a narrative for this history brings up the question of representation. Is it appropriate to think that these women could represent the many other black women athletes who competed throughout the decades of the twentieth century? There were other exceptional athletes over the years and many others who were very good. There were African American women who competed on white teams in the North that do not appear in depth in these pages. But the relationship that the athletes in this book had with sport clearly represents a path that many other African American women of their generations used to escape poor, rural, or working-class backgrounds; travel extensively; secure a college education; and reject the cultural stereotypes of African American women. Some additional names of athletes appear throughout the text as they intersect with the athlete in each chapter. Even so, many others are absent. I hope they, in some way, still see their story in these pages. In the end, it is a story of athletic women who faced and overcame a number of challenges as they strove for excellence, whose black communities gave them strong support, and who pushed back against stereotypes that attempted to define who they were as athletes and African American women. It is a story of champions whose talent, hard work, and determination to push back against racial and gender stereotypes resulted in a spectacular leap for black women athletes of the twentieth century.