LEGENDS

Alice Coachman-Davis: Black Olympic pioneer

Question: Who was the first black Georgia to determine the validity of Coach- women's competition these days. woman to win an Olympic gold medal for the man-Davis' claim. They discovered that they United States?

Answer: Wilma Rudolph did it during the 1960 Games in Rome, Italy.

Nothing could be further from the truth. The correct answer is Alice Coachman-Davis.

Coachman became the first black woman to capture first place in the Olympics in 1948 in the high jump at the London Olympiad. She champ in the 50 and she captured the national set a new Olympic record with a leap of 5-6 title in the 100 in 1945 and 1946. It's strange

Tuskegee Institute at that time and she later national AAU title from 1939-1947. earned her undergraduate degree from Albany

medium and the publicity it helped to generate the U.S. team in those events. made instant celebrities out of the gold medal "My peak years as a runner for the winners at Rome.

sports coverage was something that the net- Games then because of World War II. By the works had just started to dabble in. Coach- time the next Olympics were held, I was 25. I man-Davis (then Alice Coachman) went had already won a lot of championships and I unnoticed and unrecognized in the minds of figured that my best chance for the gold medal many Americans.

Coachman-Davis discovered later that some of the history books were just as man's opponents gave her the sincerest form unaware of her distinction among America's of flattery. They copied her style by attemptblack sports pioneers.

The children she taught at the Turner Job Corps in Albany, Ga. were also among those who were led to believe that Rudolph's accomplishments were a first.

Coachman-Davis recalled the scene vividly.

"I was a health and physical education instructor and I had given my students an assignment to read about track and field. People around Albany knew what I had done as an athlete. But they became confused when they read in the history books that Wilma Rudolph was the first. So I had to bring my gold medal and certificate to show the kids that I had the proof to back up what I had told

"I'm not bitter about it, but it's sad. They never did their research. It's almost as if they were trying to leave me out of the record books because they never printed it. The difference between myself and Wilma Rudolph is that she came along 12 years later when television was wide open. There was a lot of publicity. So from that standpoint, the media can make or break you."

The same identity problem cropped up in recent years when the U.S. hosted the '84 Games in Los Angeles. Coachman-Davis' bosses wanted to send her to LA to attend the Games. But when inquiries were made about tickets to the Olympiad, United States Olympic Committee folk said they knew not ing of her ever being an Olympian, much less being a gold medal winner.

The USOC later sent a representative to

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were in error.

woman Olympic gold medalist is that she won would pretend to mark off the spot where I students could run on the college team if they in an event that she wasn't noted for. She was was going to start my approach. But what I were good enough. Abbott got one glimpse of a four-time AAU All-American sprinter in the did was chop my steps so they couldn't tell Coachman-Davis in action and knew he had 50-yard and 100-yard dash and 440-yard

From 1943-1947, she was the national that she was overlooked in the high jump The gold medalist was a product of because she ruled that event, taking the

When the Olympic year rolled around in '48, people were shocked that she would only For nearly four decades, most of us have compete in the high jump. At that time, been led to believe that Rudolph was the first. Coachman didn't feel well enough physically And when you think about it, it's easy to see to participate in the sprints so she didn't comwhy. In '60, television began to blossom as a pete in the Olympic Trials to earn a spot on

Olympics were 1940 and 1944," Coachman-In '48, television was embryonic and Davis explained. "But of course there were no was in the high jump."

During the Olympic competition, Coaching to copy her approach to the bar, taking the same number of strides, and believing that they could duplicate her success.

It didn't work, especially when the bar was moved to 5-2, which is akin to 6-5 in



Photo by Max Dunhill

Lash discovered Coachman's skills as a high school teen-ager and played an integral role in her devel-

fit greatly if exposed to good coaching, he "Before I left for England, my college approached Abbott about having her come to coach (Cleve Abbott) told me they would be Tuskegee Institute. At that time, Tuskegee was The odd thing about the first black doing, so I was prepared when I got there. I both a high school and a college. High school



Photo by Max Dunhill

At a Sports Hall of Fame Banquet in Winston-Salem, N.C., Coachman-Davis presented her first coach, Harry Lash with her first gold medal, which she won in 1939 at the AAU National Championships.

exactly where I started my approach. So that an athlete with world-class potential. put an end to all of the copying."

Coachman and Great Britain's Sheila height increased. Both women cleared 5-6 1/4, but the Albany State alumna won because she had fewer misses on previous attempts.

The man who "discovered" Coachman is Harry Lash, girls' track coach at Madison High School in Albany. Lash, a graduate of North Carolina A & T, could see greatness written all over Coachman, even as a 16-year.

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Convinced that the youngster could bene-

The two coaches approached Coachman's parents and persuaded them to allow their Brussells engaged in heavy competition as the daughter to attend Tuskegee. The year was 1939. That summer, Coachman entered her first national AAU meet and won her first ever gold medal in the high jump.

> "I would never had achieved what I did without Harry Lash," Coachman-Davis is quick to say. "A lot of things he told me stuck with me. Even in London with me going up against the best, I could hear him telling me: You can do it. Just have faith and work hard."

- Edward Darby

PROFILE

Screen has quietly succeeded as tennis mentor

Hampton tennis coach Robert Screen has guided the Pirates into the land of NCAA net prominence.

The Pirates have won two national titles. They are the '89 Division II champs. The school claimed their first collegiate crown in '76.

Without a doubt, he has become one of the premier tennis coaches in the country - black college or white college. He is the only black college tennis coach to ever win a national title and has yet to experience a losing season.

Screen, who has a career record of 434-91 in 21 seasons, has turned Hampton into a virtual gold mine of tennis excellence during that time.

And the way he has succeeded is by recruiting some of the Third World's prime talent. Primarily, his team is composed of Nigerians and Brazilians.

Screen's pipeline of foreign players was constructed in 1970 when he first took over the tennis program at Hampton. Screen was befriended by Gladys Hellman, who was then editor/publisher of World Tennis Magazine.

"She had always received numerous letters from foreign players who inquired about different schools in the U.S. And she would attend the U.S. Tennis Nationals in Forest Hill, NY. And through that connection, I was able to meet the presidents of the tennis federations from other

In Screen's mind, it was only natural that Third World countries showed more interest in sending their athletes to a black college as opposed to only looking a the tennis programs at predominantly white

"The Europeans didn't respond to us, but the Third World nations did and it has worked out well for all of us."

It's a fortunate things for Screen and Hampton that he has a supply of foreign players. In the U.S., the top black tennis athletes almost always go to a white college. No doubt, HU couldn't be as competitive as they have been without having top-of the-line athletes.

"We're able to get the better athletes from those countries because of the athletes that have played at Hampton previously. They come over and are treated well. Those players tell other players in team. their country about the school and the program and they want to come and play for Hampton.

"What helps out so much is that the people that players recommend to us are prospects who can step in and potentially be a No. 1 player for us."

When you look at the Pirates' roster it can readily be seen that their top players come from across the water.

For example, Luis Nascimento is the No. 1 players who comes from Brazil. Nascimento finished the season at 18-8 and a No.2 national ranking Division I singles play. Islam Ul-Haq is the team's No. 2 players (18-4) and he attained a national ranking of No. 8. Ul-Haq is rated as the best player in Pakistan. Ul-Haq and



Photo by Max Dunhill

As for the really good black American tennis players, they're going to realize sooner or later that a black college like Hampton can provide them with some things that the big schools can't. I've seen so many top players go to a white college and not do well because they were never made to feel comfortable with their environment."

-- Robert Screen

Muritala Ajibade (Nigeria) finished the year as the nation's top-ranked doubles

Because of the team's foreign dominance, there have been assertions that Screen has purposely avoided the recruitment of black American players.

The truth is that Screen hasn't been able to get the black American athlete because they go to the while schools. That issue, he explained, is a very

emotional one for him. "We can get those athletes if they will take a look at us," said Screen. "Every year I go after those players, and in a lot

of cases, they won't even respond when contact them by letter." Because the top black Americans go to white colleges, some people have told Screen that he should recruit black Americans who may not be a gifted as the for-

eign players he's been getting. "They expect me to take the also-

rans," he said. "Hey, if a kid can't play that well and still wants to try out for the team, he's free to do so. But you can't expect me to offer them a scholarship if they can't play that well.

"As for the really good black American tennis players, they're going to realize sooner or later that a black college like Hampton can provide them with some things that the big schools can't. I've seen so many top players go to a white college and not do well because they were never made to feel comfortable with their environment. Kids who feel comfortable where they are, tend to play up to their potential and that's what we've seen happen with players in our program."

Screen not only has molded two national championship teams, but he has

taken Pirates tennis to a level of consistency that has been difficult for many other programs around the country to

In 21 years, the Pirates have never been ranked lower than No. 6 in the nation. Since '83, the team has finished no lower than fourth. Last year, they were the No. 1 team in the country, before losing in the finals to Chapman College. They ended the '88 season at 29-1. This year they were 22-3.

Outwardly, Screen is a low key type of coach. You'll seldom if ever see him become overly emotional when his team is on the court. "Screaming is not my style," he said. "I don't get outwardly excited. So I do look calm on the outside But people don't know what's going on

- Evan Nottingham