Althea Gibson: American Legend

(1) In 1947, Jackie Robinson became the first African American to play Major League baseball. His story is well known to most Americans and rightly so. Many movies have been made and hundreds of books written about Jackie Robinson’s life. Another African American’s story is less known.

(2) In August, 1950, a quiet 23-year old woman broke through the same color barrier and became the first African American to compete at the highest level of American tennis. Fourteen years later, the same woman broke the color barrier on the women’s professional golf tour.

(3) For Althea Gibson, the road to tennis fame and golf legend was long and rocky. Born to sharecropper parents who toiled on a cotton farm in South Carolina, her family moved to Harlem in New York City when she was three years old to seek a better life. Her childhood home was the dangerous streets of the inner city. By the time Althea was twelve, she was finding herself in trouble. She began to skip school, regularly ran away from home, and went around with gangs who liked to fight. Despite her troubled youth, she was a naturally talented athlete who excelled in sports.

(4) At the age of fourteen, her difficult teenage life was changed by tennis. Presented with a second-hand racket, she was persuaded by Walter Johnson, an African American tennis coach, to take up the game. Before long, she was playing grownups in local tournaments.

(5) Although she played tennis ferociously, Althea Gibson found no road to fame. Her skin was black, and never before had any African-American been allowed to play in a major tennis tournament. However, in 1949, when Althea was 22, her skills with the tennis racket had grown so commanding and challenging that she was ready to break through the color barrier in American tennis. It was August 28, 1950 when she was first allowed to play in the U.S. Championships, which is the modern-day U.S. Open.

(6) Although the long-limbed, five-foot ten inch Gibson won her first round match at the Forest Hills court, her playing against the country’s top women stars was disheartening. She lost more often than she won. Her struggle appeared hopeless, but Althea never gave up and carried on with the game.

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Sharecropping was a system of farming (no longer practiced in the United States) in which a white landowner allowed a poor black tenant to use the land in return for a large share of the crops produced.
Then in 1955, Althea was persuaded to embark on a tennis tour of Asia as a goodwill ambassador for her country. It was then that her playing began to blaze with surprising power. Her heart fully into tennis, she began to assert herself forcefully as one of the world’s great female players.

In 1957, although she was 30, an advanced age for a tennis player on the way up, Althea came to England to challenge the world’s finest players for the famed Wimbledon crown. In an awesome display of powerful shot-making, she romped through that symbolic world tennis championship. Althea became the first African American to win the title. England’s Queen Elizabeth presented her with the most treasured trophy in tennis. Upon her return home, the President of the United States acclaimed her feat and Althea was given a ticker-tape parade in New York.

Althea, however, was not yet done with tennis fame. Before that glorious year had come to an end, she came back to historic Forest Hills where she had broken the color barrier seven years before. Again she made history, becoming the first of her race to capture an American national tennis title.

At long last, Althea Gibson became the greatest tennis player in the world. To prove that her pioneering victories had been no lucky fluke, in the following year she again captured the Wimbledon and American tennis titles to continue her reign as tennis champion of the world.

In Althea’s day there was no prize money at major tennis tournaments, no endorsement deals, and no professional tennis tour for women. To earn a living, Althea wrote her autobiography, recorded a well-received musical album, played exhibition matches, and made TV and movie appearances.

In 1964, Althea once again broke the color barrier, becoming the first African American woman to join the Ladies Professional Golf Association tour. Althea played in tournaments and did reasonably well for fourteen years. She retired from golf at the end of the 1978 tour season. Althea was inducted in the International Tennis Hall of Fame in 1971 and the US Open Court of Tennis Champions in 2007, four years after her death.
Exercise 1: Most informational texts have a central or main idea that the author wants to get across to the reader. Answer the four questions below about “Althea Gibson: American Legend.”

1) What is the central or main idea of this text? Read the four choices below and circle the letter of the best answer. (RI.6.2)

A) Althea Gibson was a multi-sport athlete with a great talent for tennis that finally appeared when she was 30 years old.
B) Althea Gibson rose from difficult beginnings and overcame great obstacles to finally become a legendary champion.
C) Althea Gibson won Wimbledon and the US Open by never giving up her dream.
D) Fairness in American sports has changed a great deal for the better since Althea Gibson performed as an athlete.

2) Write the numbers of five paragraphs that give solid supporting details for your answer above. (RI.6.2)

______________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________

3) How does the first image and accompanying caption used in the article help support and develop the central or main idea of the text? Explain below. (RI.6.5)

______________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________

4) Math and Reading Skills: Use the information given in the text to calculate Althea’s age when she died: ________________
Exercise 2: Although Althea Gibson broke the color barrier in both tennis and women’s golf, she is not as well known, celebrated, or remembered by Americans as Jackie Robinson. Think about it and give three reasons why that may have happened on the lines below. (RI.7.3)

1) _____________________________________________
   _____________________________________________

2) _____________________________________________
   _____________________________________________

3) _____________________________________________
   _____________________________________________

Exercise 3: The title chosen by the author for this story was “Althea Gibson: American Legend.” Legend is used to describe a person who was brave, remarkable, and memorable; a person who left an impression on others beyond their own lifetime. Answer the two questions below.

1) What does the title chosen tell you about the author? How does Althea Gibson fit the role of a “legend?” (RI.7.4)
   _____________________________________________
   _____________________________________________
   _____________________________________________
   _____________________________________________

2) Think of two other individuals, either in or outside the area of sports, who you would describe as legends. What makes them legendary people? (RI.8.4)
   _____________________________________________
   _____________________________________________
   _____________________________________________
   _____________________________________________
   _____________________________________________
   _____________________________________________
Answers

Exercise 1:

B is the central or main idea.
A is too focused on simply the sporting achievements and not breaking the color barrier. C is about only the tennis aspect of the story. D is an inference you could make after reading the story but not the central or main idea of the story.

The paragraphs that best support “Althea Gibson rose from difficult beginnings and overcame great obstacles to finally become a legendary champion.” are paragraphs 3, 5, 6, 8, 9, 10, and 13. These are specifically related to answer B above.

The idea that Althea Gibson rose from difficult beginnings and overcame great obstacles is supported by the selected image of poor black sharecroppers of Althea’s era. The definition of this harsh system provided in the caption next to the image adds more detail to clarify Althea’s “difficult beginnings.” For question #4, Althea Gibson lived from 1927-2003, or 76 years.

Exercise 2:

Answers will vary. Accept reasonable responses. Some ideas are below:
1) Althea was a woman, and women have typically not been given the same recognition for sporting achievements as men.
2) Althea played the lesser-followed sports of tennis and golf, not the game known as “America’s Pastime,” which is baseball.
3) Althea broke the color barrier in her sport after Jackie Robinson, so maybe it was not as newsworthy at the time.
4) Althea was not an immediate success in her sport, tennis. Once she was allowed to play it took her seven years to win Wimbledon and the US Open. Jackie Robinson made an impact in baseball immediately after he was allowed in the major leagues.

Exercise 3:

The author believes that Althea Gibson qualifies as an American legend and clearly admires her and her accomplishments as an athlete and a human being. Althea fits the role of a legend because there are multiple examples in the text of brave, remarkable, and memorable things she did. Further, she was able to “set the stage” for future African Americans and her impression on the world of sports and the success of others goes on even though she competed long ago and is no longer living.


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**With thanks to the International Tennis Hall of Fame and European Tennis Federation for access to certain historical archives used in researching and writing this passage.**

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