

GIBSON

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take it to well. She insisted on buckling down with her studies so she could graduate as soon as possible, while she kept up with her training on the court.

After her sophomore year, it was off to Dr. Johnson's where it was time to prepare for the ATA summer circuit in July and August. She loved competing, and anything else around her became insignificant. The finest black tennis players could be found every week at the each tournament as the summer rolled along. The circuit culminated with the ATA National Championships held at the end of each summer.

Gibson competed in the women's singles and the mixed double with Dr. Johnson as her partner. In 1947, Gibson and Johnson won eight of the nine tournaments, while young Althea captured all nine singles titles, including her first ATA National Championship. It would be that particular victory that initiated a 10-year winning streak of ATA National Championships.

In 1948 she concentrated on getting through her junior year in high school, then ran roughshod through the competition the following summer.

In 1949, Gibson scored her biggest victory ever, when white tennis officials notified ATA officials that her entry to the Eastern Indoor Championships would be accepted. Any entry by a black tennis player, into a "white" tennis tournament, was a positive step forward for the black race.

Held at the 143rd Armory in Harlem, Gibson felt as if she was in her own backyard, entering the tournament as the last seed in the 32-player field. She made it past the first two rounds, advancing to the quarterfinals, only to lose 8-6, 6-0 to Betty Rosenquest. The USLTA was so pleased with Gibson's performance that she was invited to play in the National Indoor Championships the following week. Again, it was the quarterfinals where she fell short, but she had now participated in two tournaments that no other black tennis player had been.

Studying hard paid off for Gibson, she completed her senior year, and received a scholarship to Florida A&M University, where she eventually received a Bachelor of Science degree in physical education in 1953.

In July, 1950, The then-most respected woman tennis player, Alice Marble, wrote a guest editorial for American Lawn Tennis, which turned out to be a strong argument against racial discrimination.

Following Marble's words, Gibson began receiving invitations to play in tournaments everywhere. In the middle of August of the same year, Gibson was invited to play in the national championships at Forest Hills. It was the perfect birthday gift as Althea turned 23.

There was a lot of anxiety that built up to the day of her first match, but when it came, Gibson was nothing less than exquisite on the court. It was approximately 1:00 p.m. when Gibson stepped on to the court and became a part of tennis history, and then easily drilled her opponent, Barbara Knapp, 6-2, 6-2.

In the second round, Gibson brilliantly played three-time Wimbledon champion Louise Brough until a violent thunderstorm halted play. The match was suspended until the next day, and that is when a revived Brough ousted Gibson. Although she lost on the court, she had broken the color barrier in tennis, just the same as Jackie Robinson did for baseball.

The next several years were quite rough for Gibson. She would find herself amongst the top-ranked women tennis players in the world, eventually being ranked as high as seventh. In 1954, she dropped to 13th and even lost in the first-round at Forest Hills.

She had broken the color barrier at Wimbledon, but as higher expectations prevailed, her losses turned into bigger disappointments.

One day in Harlem, though, a part-time cab driver/part-time tennis instructor strived to revitalize the talents of Gibson. He suggested many things and encouraged Althea to chase that #1 ranking. Although the effort was put forth, the results did not show up. Many believed that Gibson couldn't mentally hack the sport. She didn't seem to have the drive or courage to compete.

She met a U.S. Army captain and fell in love, and that distracted her time. She even went as far as to submit an application to the Women's Army Corps and was destined for the service.

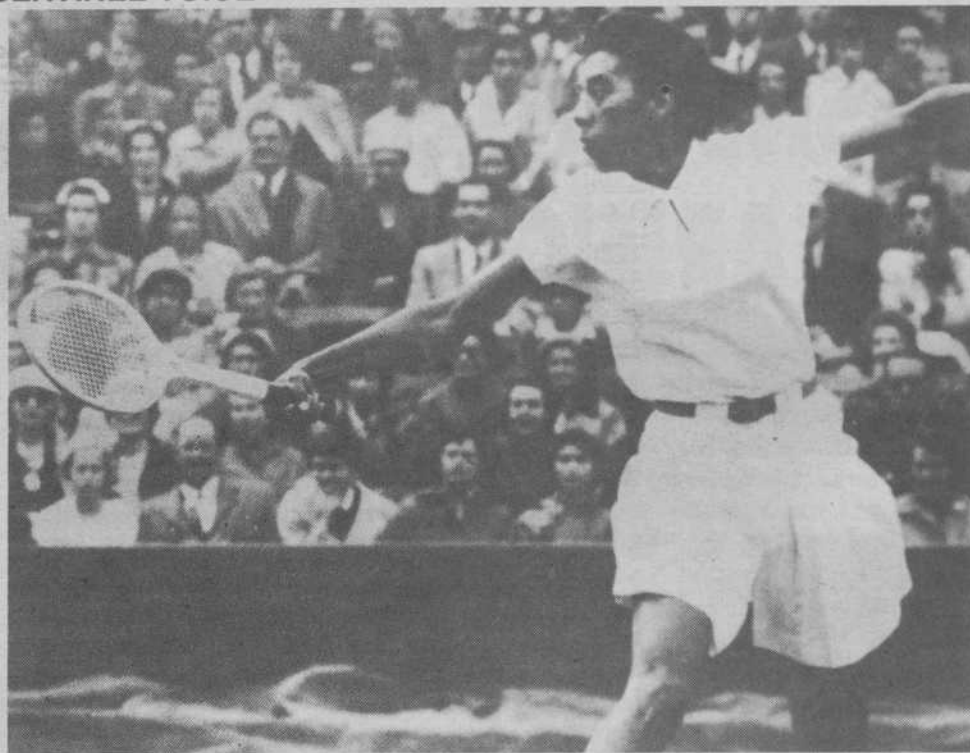
In 1955, at Forest Hills, Gibson's spirit was revisited when Renville McMann, president of the West Side Tennis Club and high-ranking official of the USLTA told her that the U.S. State Department was planning to send a team of four Americans - two women and two men - on a goodwill tour of Southeast Asia.

Perhaps it was the world-wide competition or maybe it was the attention she received, but Althea Gibson's tennis skills

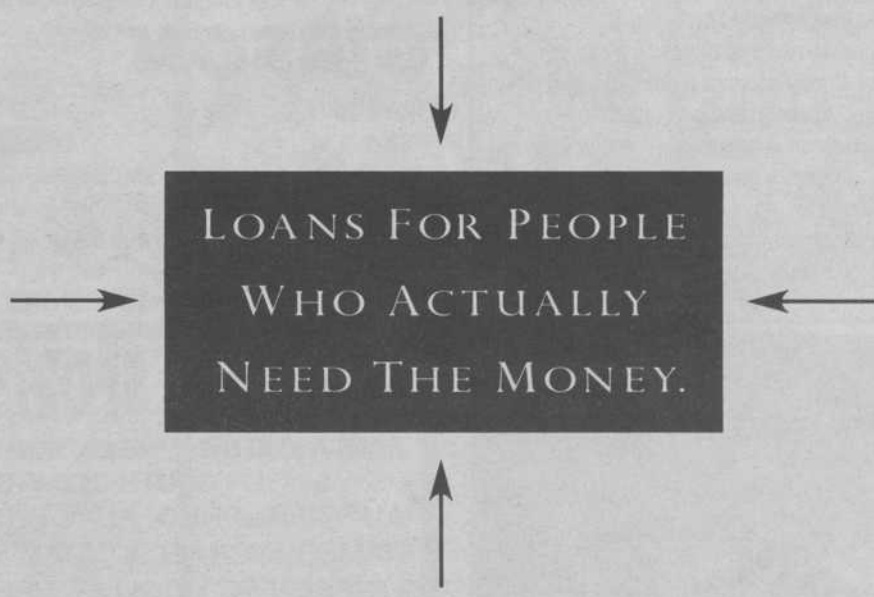
were back on the rise, and she once again became extremely powerful in the sport.

In January 1956 the tour made its final stop in Ceylon (now Sri Lanka), and Gibson had her enthusiasm revitalized. While her U.S. teammates returned to the States, Gibson stayed behind in England determined to be prepared for Wimbledon.

Gibson became the black woman to capture a major singles title anywhere in the world, when she defeated Angela Mortimer 6-3, 11-9, in the midst of a winning streak of
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