Southern Cinderpaths: Tuskegee Institute, Olympic Track and Field, and Regional Social Politics, 1916-1955

In 1952, The Coca-Cola Company produced a new advertising campaign featuring two African-American Olympic gold medalists, 1936 winner Jesse Owens and 1948 champion Alice Coachman. For three years, billboards of the two smiling track and field athletes in their U.S. uniforms, brandishing soda bottles alongside the superimposed phrase “Quality You Can Trust,” lined major roadways nationwide.¹ Coachman’s contract with Coca-Cola made her the first commercially sponsored black woman athlete in the United States.

Along southern highways, drivers may have considered the irony that neither athlete could order soft drinks in most local public spaces. Indeed, Coca-Cola executives themselves likely evaluated this inconsistency from their headquarters in Atlanta, Georgia, 170 miles North of Coachman’s own strictly segregated hometown of Albany. Yet advertisers perceived Coachman and Owens as commercially appealing to black and white consumers alike. Coca-Cola banked on the cultural power of the modern Olympics when it hired the gold medalists.²

Yet Coachman also represented an American institution several decades older than the modern Olympic Games: the southern black trade school. A graduate of Tuskegee Institute, Coachman was a product of the Tuskegee Tigerettes track program that had, in 1952, dominated American women’s running for nearly 15 years.³ When Coca-Cola highlighted Coachman’s Olympic accomplishment, it implicitly acknowledged her alma mater as the main conduit to U.S. women’s track. Coachman’s endorsement deal spoke to the national postwar visibility of black women’s running and of Tuskegee as its foundation.

This essay explores the connection between historically black schools and United States women’s running. I argue that because Tuskegee women’s track developed in tandem with the

³ Coachman attended Albany State College after graduating from Tuskegee in 1947 with a dressmaking degree. She took a Bachelor of Science degree in Home Economics and a Science minor at Albany in 1949. She was an Albany student when she competed in the 1948 Games, though she had spent the previous six years at Tuskegee.
Anne Blaschke

national squad and dominated the sport from 1937 to 1955, its team demographics and ideology influenced American women’s sport. Tuskegee’s unique philosophy—its two-pronged history of outward racial accommodation and subversive activism practiced since the school’s founding by Booker T. Washington in 1881—strongly affected women’s track as its athletes comprised almost the entire national team. Tuskegee’s worldview translated to athletics in its ostensibly menial training in simple subjects, like running, but its relentless underlying efforts to specialize and perform elite work, and in its guarded, but increasingly expansive, conception of gender roles. My research aligns with a recent revisionist interpretation of Tuskegee Institute’s founding principles and the ideology of Booker T. Washington. This historiographical reassessment sees Washington as a staunch advocate of black equality, a creative race man willing to work within the context of his environment—the Redeemers’ Jim Crow South—to make practical changes for southern blacks in the safest possible way.4

Tuskegee athletic director Cleveland Abbott inculcated the Tuskegee model in his women’s team, emphasizing elite ambitions, specialist training, and careful attention to, yet equal opportunity for, women’s agency. From the school’s first humble women’s track meet in 1929, Abbott planned to develop Olympic athletes whose talent would showcase the black South.5 This ambition reflected a core commitment to students’ exceptionalism that Washington had downplayed in public but privately encouraged during his lifetime. Abbott developed alternative institutions based on this value system that propelled black women athletes into the national sport network. Women’s track and field was a markedly successful laboratory for classic Washingtonian activism, with its twinned strategy of appeasement and advocacy.

Including Tuskegee women meant dismantling Jim Crow at national meets held in southern cities, a struggle won by the early 1930s.6 Even as black women faced blatant


5 Cleveland Abbott, Tuskegee, to “Dear Sir” (“Fourth Annual Tuskegee Relays”), 17 March 1930, TUA 177-002, Track and Field Papers, Tuskegee Institute Athletic Association, Archives, Tuskegee University, Tuskegee, AL; hereinafter TUA, 1.

6 “Minutes of the Annual Meeting,” November 21–23, 1927, Amateur Athletic Union Archives; hereinafter AAU, 265. Black men had competed in all national-level meets, regardless of local social custom, under specific AAU policy since 1927, when the AAU Board of Governors voted against “the exclusion of athletes of the negro race from participation in the National Championships.” However, black male athletes whose qualifying events had not
discrimination on U.S. Olympic teams in the socially repressive interwar decade, Tuskegee athletes secured dominance over domestic sport. Their national legitimacy and influence grew during the forties and mid-1950s, decades in which Tuskegee students composed U.S. teams almost exclusively. Black collegiate athletes were not the sole vehicles to elite sport; ethnic, industrial, and immigrant urban recreation clubs nationwide injected a more racially diverse element into women’s running, fostering several talented white athletes in the 1930s. But Tuskegee ideology proved the overwhelmingly successful model to permeate American women’s running with its distinctive framework at mid-century. The institution’s model was so successful, in fact, that its fall from dominance in 1955 occurred at the hands of the regional competitor, Tennessee State University, that had most conspicuously imitated the Tuskegee approach.

Coachman’s Coca-Cola contract was just one manifestation of black women Olympic runners in an increasingly public eye at home and abroad. As international politics roiled with postwar financial crises, decolonization struggles, and Cold War realignment, mainstream Americans entered a period of uneasy domestic consensus that belied ongoing civil rights activism. Black women athletes enabled U.S. diplomats to laud the success of American racial progressivism and democratic capitalism. The Coachman-Owens billboard speaks to American consumers’ same effort to feel good about domestic postwar society. Though Coachman eagerly accepted the contract, shilling for Coca-Cola as a model of American prosperity clashed with her lived experience as an Olympic champion; after her victory she returned to Albany, a rigidly segregationist community. She negotiated this tension after graduation by embodying the Washingtonian trade education ideal, settling in Albany to teach and coach girls’ track.


7 Frances Kaszubski, Stella Walsh, Mildred “Babe” Didrikson [Zaharias] and Helen Stephens were the most prominent white tracksters of the 1930s and 1940s. On “welfare capitalism” and the formation of industrial sport teams in the interwar period, see: Lizabeth Cohen, Making a New Deal: Industrial Workers in Chicago, 1919-1939, 2nd ed. Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008, 160, 177, 179. On national women’s sport among working-class and ethnic women athletes of the 1900-1930s, see: Susan K. Cahn, Coming On Strong: Gender and Sexuality in Twentieth-Century Women’s Sport. New York: The Free Press, 1994, chaps. 1-2. Cahn notes that for wealthy and middle-class women, sport was part of the New Woman phenomenon of the 1910s and 1920s. For working class and immigrant women, joining company, intramural, ethnic, or religion-based teams was a part of identity formation and enclave building in the same period.
Booker T. Washington had been dead one year when Tuskegee sport administrators began the school’s first women’s track team in 1916. By the time female undergraduates voted to start the Tuskegee Tigerettes squad in 1929, the founder had been gone a generation. Yet Washington cast a long shadow over women’s track and field. Teachers and coaches adapted his Janus-faced approach to race relations to sport by emphasizing expertise and by pushing gender roles, but stopping short of direct subversion of the traditional male-female division that had governed institutional gender relations since the 1880s.  

Washington himself, along with his brother James B. Washington, whom he hired as athletic director in 1890, had presided over early women’s physical activity. While men’s “distance running” seemed a natural addition to male students’ regular military drills at the turn of the century, administrators initially found adding exercise to the women’s curriculum less practical. Progressives’ arguments for women’s health, however, induced the Washington brothers to begin female physical education by 1900. James Washington hired women’s physical education teacher Amelia Roberts, who immediately secured approval for a women’s basketball team, in 1905. After the founder’s death, James Washington also recruited Cleveland Abbott, Midwestern star athlete and sole non-white undergraduate at South Dakota State College (SDSU), for an assistant athletic department position in 1916, which he held until his acceptance

---


10 On early Tuskegee Institute military drilling: Ross C. Owen, “History of Athletics at Tuskegee Institute,” n.d. [ca. 1962], “Cross Country” section. File Cabinet Files, TUA, unpaginated. Although Tuskegee began men’s football and basketball teams in the 1890s, competitive sport was not a high priority for Washington as a site of students’ enrichment. He observed in 1901, “Games I care little for. I have never seen a game of football….I suppose I would care for games now if I had had any time in my youth to give to them, but that was not possible.” Washington, Up From Slavery, 121.

to Army training at Fort Des Moines, Iowa the following year. Roberts, now the director of women’s physical education, simultaneously initiated women’s track and field at Tuskegee.

Early women’s track and field at Tuskegee, however, proved a flop. As an extracurricular activity, women’s track had few participants and evidently gained little renown in its first 15 years. Unlike basketball, which won approval from administration and students alike at the turn of the twentieth century in southern black institutions, track and field was less popular in its first generation. Female students avoided the 1916 team for several reasons. First, lack of intercollegiate competition meant that little challenge existed during the track season. White schools refused to run against them, and few black schools featured women’s running. Moreover, running track, widely considered a masculine sport, threatened young women’s reputations in the early twentieth century when the campus was still strictly gendered in terms of course offerings and overall Institute policy. Though the women’s team technically existed between 1916 and 1929, women’s track had little impact on the regional black collegiate athletic organization, the Southeastern Intercollegiate Athletic Conference (SIAC).

Thirteen years later, however, Cleve ‘Major’ Abbott, after having served in World War I, had returned to Tuskegee as director of both physical education and athletics, and taken aggressive steps to strengthen student sport participation and skill. His effort, along with growing female student interest and a shifting context for understanding women in sport at the school, saw Tuskegee’s women’s track team become a viable entity in 1929-1930.

President Robert R. Moton’s tenure-track hire of Abbott in 1923 followed Washington’s precedent of employing experts to teach Tuskegee undergraduates. A superb athlete, Abbott

13 Liberti discusses women’s basketball in twentieth-century black collegiate programs.
15 Washington’s 1896 appointment of botanist George Washington Carver to Agriculture Department Chair speaks to his effort to teach ostensibly simple tasks at expert levels. Though agriculture seemed on the surface a menial
Anne Blaschke

had earned 14 athletic letters at SDSU; helmed the recreation program at Officers’ Training Camp, Fort Des Moines, Iowa in 1917; fought in the Great War; and served as Cadet Commandant and coach at Kansas Vocational College in Topeka for four years. He applied this leadership experience to his recruitment and training of Tuskegee football and men’s track teams, his main responsibilities during the 1920s. As an excellent athlete and decorated veteran, Abbott brought discipline and motivation to Tuskegee’s “Tigers” athletics. Yet as a black man he was unable to rustle up local competition for the men’s track team his first years as director. The SIAC proved sluggish, and his athletes’ skin color barred them from competition against regional white teams and entry in Amateur Athletic Union (AAU) contests, which observed formal segregation in men’s sport until 1927. The New York Athletic Club, the nation’s other premier running organization, also refused black athletes. A Midwesterner by birth, Abbott was unaccustomed to Jim Crow playing fields. His wife Jessie Abbott, who arrived in Alabama with her husband in 1923, remembered his first attempts to drum up local competition: “Major…found out that there was no outlet and no participation for young Negro Men and women at all in track and other sports, except among Negro schools. They couldn’t compete, because they were segregated.” Undaunted, Abbott sought to counter the dearth of available rivals and other negative effects of Jim Crow on student athletes by creating a large-scale meet for black schools, breathing new energy into the torpid SIAC. He created a massive regional track and field event, the Tuskegee Relays, for his male tracksters in 1927 and eagerly sought to

subject of the sort approved by northern philanthropists and white southerners, Carver’s genius inspired generations of students to pursue agricultural and chemical innovation.


19 Jessie Abbott transcript, p. 11.
Anne Blaschke

establish its legitimacy in American sport. After just one year, Abbott framed the Relays in robust terms suggesting national influence:

Founded last year to stimulate interest in Track and Field Athletics and to promote a clean wholesome competitive spirit and sportsmanship among the colored schools of the South, the Tuskegee Relays have taken a commanding position among similar athletic events in the United States. The twenty-one events on the Relay Program this year is bringing several score of athletes to Tuskegee whose efforts will be rewarded by handsome trophies, and the distinctive medals that represent supremacy.21

Though his description suggested masculine agency and dominance, within two years Abbott took seriously women’s interest in competitive running as well, in no small part because female Tuskegee students demonstrated their desire to participate by starting a new track team of their own.

On a Friday afternoon in February 1929, the women students of Tuskegee Institute gathered to consider starting a new women’s track and field squad. Carefully chaperoned by the school’s Dean of Women, Mrs. Edna S. Landers, attendees of the “regular Friday afternoon girls’ meeting” had much to discuss.22 In light of the men’s success in the Tuskegee Relays and increasingly active women’s physical education and sport opportunities, this new generation “voted heartily in favor” of beginning another women’s track team.23 Following the vote, 44 newly inaugurated Tuskegee “Tigerettes” took to the cinders to compete against their sister schools in the SIAC.

Abbott and the new women tracksters promoted the team in several ways. First, the coach emphasized, high hopes for the team lay in its crossover with the women’s basketball squad. In particular, Hattie Lindsay and Fidelia Adams, Tuskegee hoop stars, planned to train in the throwing events. By highlighting their contributions, tracksters sought both athletic and social legitimacy. Basketball players had assimilated as women athletes more easily than had runners in past decades, and because basketball had been accepted as appropriate for women more than 20

20 “Official Program, First Annual Tuskegee Relays,” 7 May 1927, TUA 177.003. Track and Field Papers, TUA, 1.
21 “Official Program, Second Annual Tuskegee Relays,” 5 May 1928, Box 2, Alice Coachman Papers, TUA, 2.
22 “Tuskegee Institute, Ala., Feb 1929, (Athletic News Bureau),” February 1929, TUA 177.002, Track and Field Papers, TUA, 1. It is unclear from the source exactly how many of Tuskegee Institute’s high school and college women attended the meeting, though it was likely several hundred. More than 1,500 students attended at the time of Booker T. Washington’s death in 1915. At least 45 undergraduates, according to the memo, joined the team at this meeting.
23 “Tuskegee Institute, Ala., Feb 1929, (Athletic News Bureau),” February 1929, TUA 177.002, Track and Field Papers, TUA, 1.
years before, the hoopsters had benefitted from community support to become SIAC champions. Further prestige came in women sprinters’ opportunity to compete in “An added feature of the Tuskegee Relays this year… [a] ¼ Mile Relay Race for coeds for the “National Championship of America,”’’ the winner of which would receive a trophy “offered by one of Tuskegee’s successful women graduates.” Though the AAU, which coordinated the “national championships,” had not sanctioned the event, framing it as such enabled Abbott to build confidence in his women runners and motivate them to run U.S.-record-breaking times. It also encouraged SIAC schools to send women runners to this new event, and local residents and students to support the new women’s team capable of winning a national championship on campus. Having a “successful woman graduate” present the trophy spoke to school administrators’ hopes that the women runners would find their own social success in her example.

Abbott enabled the Tigerettes to hone their skills and experience competition outside the school by adding not one, but two women’s events, the 100-yard dash and the quarter mile relay, to the May 4, 1929, relay carnival. The event program did not emphasize women’s inclusion, noting only that “Tuskegee’s purpose in holding the carnival is to foster track and field athletics…the management of the Tuskegee Relays has made every effort to arrange a high class program of events and to provide the best setting possible for the contests. We welcome the young men and women to Tuskegee.” If the Relay Games Committee failed to call attention to this gender milestone, it nonetheless carefully prepared for women’s participation. Aware that SIAC women competitors, many of whom had never seen so large a school as Tuskegee, would be arriving to make new acquaintances and to run in public, Tuskegee administrators assigned “Guest Hostesses for Young Women” to female competitors, who served the primary function of

25 “Tuskegee Institute, Ala., Feb 1929 [holograph], (Athletic News Bureau),” February 1929, TUA 177.002, Track and Field Papers, TUA, 1. Note: by 1934, the team had 26 members. Of this number, three were juniors or seniors; 15 were high school students. The remainder comprised freshmen, along with one “B Prep” and one sophomore student. See: “Memorandum: The following women are members…” 1 May 1934, TUA 177.002, Track and Field Papers, TUA, 1–2.
26 “Tuskegee Institute, Ala., Feb 1929 [holograph], (Athletic News Bureau),” February 1929, TUA 177.002, Track and Field Papers, TUA 1; “Official Program: Third Annual Tuskegee Relays,” 4 May 1929, TUA 177.001, Track and Field Cross Country Papers, TUA, 11, 14.
27 “Official Program: Third Annual Tuskegee Relays,” 4 May 1929, TUA 177.001, Track and Field Cross Country Papers, TUA, 2; Cleveland Abbott, Tuskegee, to “Dear Sir” ("Fourth Annual Tuskegee Relays"), 17 March 1930, TUA 177.002, Track and Field Papers, Tuskegee Institute Athletic Association, TUA, 1; “Ross Owen answers to ‘Questionnaire to Associates of Mr. Abbott,’” n.d. [ca. 1955], TUA 007.001, Cleveland Abbott Papers, TUA, 2.
protecting Tuskegee from any implication of impropriety. Inviting unmarried teen women to campus to sprint, wearing shorts and tank tops, in view of strange young men, necessitated appropriate supervision. Challenging gender mores in the black South, Abbott knew, would be no small task; if black women’s running were to succeed, no accusations of immodesty could mar the sport’s early efforts.

Coach Abbott was ambitious. Within one year of including women in the Tuskegee Relay Carnival, he announced plans to mold his green young runners into Olympians. That most of Tuskegee’s inaugural team had never heard of the international event mattered little to the director. With expectations that his women would attain elite status in the United States, Abbott developed a comprehensive training regimen to build the program’s strength from the ground up. The Tuskegee Relays would be the foundation for this construction. In 1930, he mailed a circular to SIAC members in advance of the next meet. “Dear Sir,” he began, “In order to encourage our young women to take an active part in track work also with the thought of developing Olympic material among our group here in the South, the 50 yard dash and discus throw for young women is being added this year.” Here Abbott exposed his optimism in the raw talent of the women he had already begun training and his own aspiration of making an example of elite black skill in the American South. In keeping with Washingtonian theory, placing women runners, jumpers and throwers on Olympic teams would demonstrate the black South’s worth to the region and nation. Abbott’s audacious request for more women competitors garnered positive results from area schools, as did a summer farm team program for high school runners. While some tracksters “had already been participating in the spiked shoe sport and have shown satisfactory progress in track work,” Abbott now trained new runners, too.

The Tigerettes fit the mold of gender roles at Tuskegee Institute that had been dominant since Washington’s day. Though student course loads had remained highly gendered, they became increasingly specialized. Women’s sport, beginning with tennis, had experienced this emphasis on specialization in the early-to-mid twentieth century as athletic administrators remained committed to Washington’s model of excelling at simple tasks to benefit southern

---

29 Cleveland Abbott, Tuskegee, to “Dear Sir” (“Fourth Annual Tuskegee Relays”), 17 March 1930, TUA 177.002, Track and Field Papers, Tuskegee Institute Athletic Association, TUA, 1.
30 “Tuskegee Institute, Ala., Feb 1929 [holograph], (Athletic News Bureau),” February 1929, TUA 177.003, Track and Field Papers, TUA, 1.
Anne Blaschke

communities. Women faculty—acutely conscious of maintaining the distinctive gender-appropriate roles that Tuskegee stressed—framed tennis as an activity at which women could both excel and retain their femininity before World War I.31 As the first women’s sport in which athletes played individually, tennis enabled its women players unprecedented agency. Jessie Abbott, a talented player, developed a girls’ team after she and her husband settled at Tuskegee in 1923.32 “Major” Abbott added clay courts and immersed himself in SIAC tennis in the 1920s to hone his students’ technique. The more specialization faculty contributed to tennis at Tuskegee, the more proficient students became.

The same phenomenon existed in track and field. Yet the sport had different gender connotations than did tennis, or even basketball, the other main sport in which women competed in the 1920s. Running, throwing, and jumping—or rather, the speed and strength these activities required—made track seem more masculine than these other options for women. Given Tuskegee’s tradition of subversive expertise, it is no surprise that Abbott sought international greatness for women’s track. This powerful institutional legacy, however, ran into complex traditional gender mores within the local black community.33

Key Tuskegee figures disapproved of women running track, putting shots, throwing javelins, and participating in the other highly physical components of track and field. “Some of the Tuskegee people didn’t think too much of it,” recalled Jessie Abbott.34 Although women students voted the team into existence, alumni remembered Abbott as the driving force behind its early survival, leading with “nothing but faith, with traditions and very discouraging obstacles to

31 “Fifty Years of Tennis at Tuskegee,” n.d. [ca. 1959], Box 1, Cleveland Abbott Papers, TUA, 2–3.
32 Jessie Abbott transcript, p. 34.
34 Jessie Abbott transcript, p. 13.
face,” in the earliest seasons. Washington’s long-held separation of gender roles fit this allusion. Despite this unsupportive environment, “[Abbott] encouraged young Negro women to disregard seemingly [sic] indelicacies and develop themselves to the point where they [could] compete with the best young women of any race in the field of athletic sports.” In addition to administrative and faculty disapproval, female tracksters faced a more fearsome scourge: their male classmates’ disdain. Tuskegee men, Jessie Abbott remembered, found women tracksters unappealing to the point that “the boys actually tried to discourage the girls from participating in sports” in the first seasons of women’s track. Despite these gendered social pressures to sit in the stands, over 20 women trained each year in the 1930s.

As coach Abbott taught complex training techniques, in the tradition of Tuskegee professors who practiced specialization in such deceptively “menial” subjects as farming or carpentry. The Tigerettes won individual and team awards at the Tuskegee Relays, bringing regional notice to the school and increasing attention in the national sports community. Though the SIAC and Tuskegee meet were born of Jim Crow, Abbott continued to market the annual Relays as a critical site of American talent. A Tuskegee press release from the 1934 Relays noted “a record breaking crowd of track fans, who were rewarded by seeing the cream of our women athletes break one American record in the 50 meter trials and break five meet records, and give startling performances in several other events.” Such praise conflated Tuskegee track with United States track and field and ensured that school administrators and community residents identified the Relays with elite skill, less than ten years since the program had begun.

The women’s notable improvement, however, created tension when they surpassed the men’s team in winnings, challenging the school’s longtime pattern of masculine athletic dominance. While the Tigers had performed impressively in SIAC track since the 1910s, their rankings slipped in the 1930s. The Tigerettes, in contrast, became conference champions just a few years into their track program. This discrepancy was not lost on Tuskegee’s regional competition. As far afield as Knoxville, Tennessee, local black colleges reported on the men’s failure to maintain their former regional control. “Tuskegee, a school which has long been dominant in previous relays,” confided Knoxville’s Aurora sports correspondent Leon McCrary.

36 Ibid.
in 1935, “was merely another participant in a meet which foretold a new era in the world of track and field endeavors.” Though the *Aurora*, in a telling commentary on regional blindness to women’s sport at mid-decade, failed to cover the women’s events, Tuskegee’s Tigerettes had dominated that meet. Abbott took stock of local gender norms but continued the women’s program apace, confident that significant women’s success would quiet the Tigerettes’ critics. Jessie Abbott recalled that in response to male Tuskegee students’ discomfort, her husband “just went right on,” while “the girls went right on learning track and field.”

As the women “went right on” training, their times improved. By 1936, Abbott took the first all-black women’s team to the AAU national championship in Providence, Rhode Island. Participating in sport outside the Jim Crow South meant exposure to less restrictive racial codes. Informal antipathy toward blacks in cities beyond the South, however, came with attendant challenges. International competition even saw these same conditions. At the 1936 Berlin Olympic Games, American administrators demonstrated that the country was not ready to accept black women athletes. Black sprinter Louise Stokes qualified for a berth on the 4x100 Olympic relay team, only to be replaced by a white runner in Germany. Though Jesse Owens, one of the few black males on the American squad in Berlin, also faced slights within the USOC, he was allowed to compete and won four gold medals. His achievement, as American media white and black noted, flew in the face of Hitler’s call for Aryan supremacy in Germany. Stokes was not afforded Owens’s opportunity to make this kind of sweeping symbolic gesture, or indeed, to compete in the finals at all. Tuskegee’s Tigerettes realized that although the AAU had allowed black women to board the boat to Europe, severe racism among the national sport elite remained restrictive. The Olympic plans Abbott had made in 1930 remained uncertain, though his athletes

---

41 “Questionnaire to Associates of Mr. Abbott,” n.d. [ca. 1955], TUA, 007.001, Cleveland Abbott Papers, TUA, 2.
42 Abbott also dealt with national racial antipathy in other sports. When Tuskegee’s football team played Wilberforce University at Chicago’s 1936 South Side Athletic Carnival, mayor Edward Kelly issued an official proclamation “ur[g]ing all of our citizens to cooperate.” See Edward J. Kelly, “A Proclamation,” 5 October 1936, Box 1, Cleveland Abbott Papers, TUA, 1.
43 Stokes and another 1936 teammate, Tidye Pickett, had also experienced exclusion on the 1932 U.S. Olympic team; white athlete Babe Didrikson had doused Stokes with ice-cold water and used racial slurs, and the USOC had replaced both Stokes and Pickett with white runners in the 4x100 relay. Four years later the USOC, headed by Chicago millionaire and avid sportsman Avery Brundage, again replaced Stokes in the final moments. Manuscript draft notes for *Jump High* (never published as intended), n.d. [ca. 1972], SC Micro 5858, John P. Davis Papers, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library, reel 1, microfilm; hereinafter SCRBC.
challenged the conditions that had barred Stokes abroad by competing at the AAU national championships and Olympic Trials consistently into the 1950s.

Tuskegee’s Tigerettes built their recruitment, technique, and competitive ability in the later thirties. Work scholarships enabled many women who competed to attend college. Abbott also continually invited talented teens to attend summer camps, transfer to Tuskegee Institute High School, or matriculate as college students. While the team skewed young, its depth was unparalleled by the late 1930s. Results came in 1937 when Tigerettes won the national championship, a feat they would repeat until 1955. The track staff proudly reported on the 1939 AAU National Championship meet at Waterbury, Connecticut: “Facing the keenest competition of the best entry list in the history of the event, in which the cream of the crop participated, Tuskegee scored two first places, four second places, three third places, and one fourth place to outclass their nearest rival.” This dominance led them to expect inclusion on the 1940 Olympic team. Yet, the International Olympic Committee cancelled both the 1940 and 1944 Games because of World War II. Limited by geopolitics to domestic competition, Tuskegee dominated United States track in the forties. The Tigerettes succeeded against southern racism by exercising Washington’s long-held mentality of friendly relations with the white community and underlying determination to produce elite students. In the 1940s Alice Coachman exemplified the complications of training in the Deep South to represent the United States as a female athlete.

Coachman was born to poor parents in the small town of Albany, Georgia in 1922. Barred from white sport facilities as a child, she built high jumps from rope and wood scraps until seventh grade, when local black teacher Cora Bailey saw her practicing and encouraged her

46 By 1934, the team had 26 members. Of this number, just three were juniors or seniors; 15 were high school students. The remainder were freshmen, along with one “B Prep” and one sophomore student. See: “Memorandum: The following women are members…” 1 May 1934, TUA 177.002, Track and Field Papers, TUA, 2.
47 Patrick B. Miller, “‘To Bring the Race Along Rapidly’: Sport, Student Culture, and Educational Mission at Historically Black Colleges during the Interwar Years,” History of Education Quarterly, 35 (Summer 1995), 120–121. In 1943 the Tigerettes fell short of team victory at the national championships. See: “Women’s Title Track,” Amateur Athlete, August 1944, p. 4, AAU.
48 “Tuskegee Institute, Ala., September 3, 1939 [press release],” 3 September 1939, TUA 177.002, Track and Field Papers, TUA, 1.
49 While men’s track stopped its cross country event during World War II, cross country or long distance running had never been added to women’s track, so women’s sport proceeded as it had before the war. (A 1926 Christmas Day cross country run, the inauguration of this event at Tuskegee, had been “open to all students,” but only seven students, all male, participated. See: Ross C. Owen, “History of Athletics at Tuskegee Institute,” n.d. [ca. 1962], “Cross Country” section, File Cabinet Files, TUA, unpagedinated.)
Anne Blaschke

efforts. As an adolescent, she accompanied the local high school to the Tuskegee Relays and smashed the high jump record. During the late 1930s and early 1940s, Coachman dominated both sprint events and the high jump at the Tuskegee Relays, AAU meets, and any other competition she could enter as a black student.

Despite her obvious potential, convincing Coachman to train at Tuskegee proved no easy task for Abbott. “I had never been out of the city of Albany in my life,” remembered Coachman. “Come over here to Tuskegee, I didn't have any clothing to wear…some [teachers] bought me some tennis shoes, because I was jumping without any shoes.” This level of poverty and provincialism was common to black women who would become elite runners in the 1940s. Immersion in the relatively cosmopolitan world of Tuskegee track overwhelmed Coachman at first. Yet the same barriers of inexperience and poverty that made high-level track intimidating also proved its greatest allure. “The thing that sold me,” she acknowledged, “was that in the summer of 1939, they had the World’s Fair in New York City…and the whole team went to the World’s Fair….Never been any place before.” Campus life also became a window onto regional, national, and even international culture. Of the difference between her hometown and the community of Tuskegee, Coachman mused:

Albany was bigger than Tuskegee but the world came to Tuskegee for blacks. All of the big stars came to Tuskegee: the big bands, opera, and Broadway. There was a lot of world cultural development at Tuskegee. I got to fly a Cub plane at Tuskegee. This would not have happen[ed] in the fields of Albany.

Joining the Tigerettes’ squad composed a part of an overwhelmingly cosmopolitan high school and college experience. Since Washington’s day Tuskegee had been a cultural epicenter for the African Diaspora. For Coachman and her teammates, most of whom were also regional teens from poor families, the institution offered opportunities on campus and through athletic competition that they had never imagined. Once she adjusted to her new identity as a world-class runner, Coachman embraced the broad-based worldview that elite track required. By the mid-

---

51 NVLP Coachman Interview.
52 Ibid.
53 Alice Coachman, interview with author, February 4, 2011, interview in author’s possession.
forties, she had won every sprint-distance running event, as well as held the national high jump title since 1939.\textsuperscript{54}

Coachman was one among a deep lineup in the 1940s. Multiple Tigerettes took honors at the Tuskegee Relays and AAU meets. In 1946 Tuskegee women claimed national championships in every sprint event.\textsuperscript{55} Their success continued to create awkwardness when compared to performances of the school’s male athletes. After lauding freshman Tigerette Nell Jackson in a 1946 letter to a reporter, Tuskegee administrator R. S. Darnaby lamented, “I regret that I am unable to give you the names of some male athletes…who would be regarded as Olympic prospects.”\textsuperscript{56} This disparity pointed up how strong the women’s program had grown.

Abbott had played an indispensible role in getting the Tigerettes to this high point. His influence in southern and national sport communities had grown in the interwar period; during the 1940s he reaped the benefits of coaching success in football and women’s track.\textsuperscript{57} In 1946 Abbott solidified his national influence, accepting a position on the USOC Track and Field Games Committee for the upcoming 1948 London Olympiad, becoming the only black USOC member.\textsuperscript{58} His appointment spoke to the prestige Tuskegee had attained in U.S. sport, despite its extremely limited Jim Crow competition range. Back home, Abbott’s selection became a point of school and race pride. “We extend to Mr. Abbott,” declared alumni newsletter editors, “our sincere congratulations upon the high honor that has come to him in this appointment to the Olympic track and field games Committee and assure him that we greatly appreciate the honor it brings to our Alma Mater and the Negro Race.”\textsuperscript{59} If Abbott’s selection pointed up the influence of Tuskegee’s ideology in U.S. women’s track, his protégé Coachman confirmed it at the 1948 London Games, winning the only gold medal for any United States women’s sport.

Coachman had gained confidence and skill in the mid-to-late 1940s. In London, she

\textsuperscript{54} Manuscript draft notes for \textit{Jump High} (never published as intended), n.d. [ca. 1972], SC Micro 5858, John P. Davis Papers, SCRBC, reel 1, microfilm.

\textsuperscript{55} “Minutes of the Fifty-Eighth Annual Meeting,” December 6–8, 1946, p. 87, AAU.

\textsuperscript{56} R. S. Darnaby, Tuskegee, to unknown correspondent, n.d. [ca. 1946], Box 1, Nell Jackson Papers, TUA, 1.

\textsuperscript{57} National organizations sought Abbott’s membership and guidance. He became the first vice president of the American Tennis Association early the decade. In 1946 and 1948 he served on the Injuries and Fatalities Committee of the American Football Coaches Association; Purdue University coach Floyd R. Eastwood confided in March 1946 that “I am looking forward to receiv[ing] a great deal of help and guidance from you.” Floyd R. Eastwood, West Lafayette, Ind., to Cleveland Abbott, Tuskegee, 29 March 1946, Box 2, Cleveland Abbott Papers, TUA, 1.

\textsuperscript{58} Photo caption: “Congratulations—Major Cleve L. Abbott, director of athletics at Tuskegee Institute, Ala., and discoverer of Miss Alice Coachman….,” \textit{Chicago Defender}, October 2, 1948, p. 47, Box 1, Alice Coachman Papers, TUA.

\textsuperscript{59} “Tuskegee Alumni News Briefs,” Volume II, No. 2, October 1946, Box 1, Cleveland Abbott Papers, TUA, 3.
gracefully salvaged an otherwise marginal performance for U.S. track and American women overall. Her first place in the high jump made her the first black woman to win Olympic gold, and the reaction of the Tuskegee community and black Americans broadly was intense. Tuskegeeans claimed her as one of their own, despite her graduation two years earlier and subsequent enrollment at Albany State College in her native Georgia, while black luminaries feted her in New York City. Count Basie threw her a party.\textsuperscript{60}

Political liberals also lauded her victory and the broader success of black women athletes on the United States Olympic team. President Harry Truman invited Coachman and five of her U.S. women’s track and field teammates to the White House in late October of 1948 to celebrate their achievement. He hosted the women on the weekend of the annual black collegiate “Capital Classic” football championship at Washington, D.C.’s Griffith Stadium, an occasion that, his daily staff noted in advance, “is an important event and compares with the Rose Bowl Game.”\textsuperscript{61} Coachman remembered Truman’s conversation as brief congratulations, while Jessie Abbott, the Tigerettes’ female chaperone, recalled him giving each Olympian a souvenir matchbook reading “I swiped these from Harry.”\textsuperscript{62} He also autographed two footballs for the Capital Classic to be played by Wilberforce University and Tennessee State University, and acknowledged the presence of administrators in attendance on behalf of that annual men’s event. Yet this quick encounter symbolized an important moment for black women’s sport in American culture as Truman linked the tradition of black athletic excellence with national achievement.\textsuperscript{63} By combining these two celebrations of black United States sport, Truman maximized the press coverage and favorable sentiment of the black community, making this a public relations coup likely to increase his standing among black constituents less than two weeks before the 1948 presidential election. Significantly, all women invitees hailed from either Tuskegee Institute or Tennessee State University. The national and black press, the federal government, and American sporting organizations like the AAU all perceived these two southern black trade schools—Tuskegee most prominently—as dominating a successful branch of United States sport.

\textsuperscript{60} “Olympic Legends,” \textit{Essence}, January 1996, p. 96, Box 2, Alice Coachman Papers, TUA.
\textsuperscript{61} On “Capital Classic,” see: Jessie Abbott transcript, p. 16. On White House visit, see: “Friday, October 22, 1948,” January-December 1948 Folder, Daily Appointments, Box 4, Daily Presidential Appointments File (Original Set), Matthew J. Connelly Files, Staff Member and Office Files, Papers of Harry S. Truman, Harry S. Truman Presidential Library.
\textsuperscript{62} Jessie Abbott transcript, p. 16.
\textsuperscript{63} “NEGRO ACES VISIT TRUMAN; Footballs for Wilberforce Game Autographed by President,” \textit{New York Times}, October 23, 1948. p. 11.
Coachman’s win, which capped off a college career of unprecedented success on the cinders by an American woman, cemented Tuskegee’s prominence in American sport in the late 1940s. After her victory, her mentor Abbott was asked to join the Women’s Track and Field AAU Selection Committee, the same group that had barred black runners from competing less than 15 years before. Coachman also paved the way for younger Tuskegee runners to attain unprecedented local prestige. Tigerette teen Nell Jackson failed to medal in London but returned home a school hero for having elevated her pursuit of excellence to an unusually intense level. “Perseverance in athletic training became such an obsession with her that it took hold of her whole life,” noted a columnist for Tuskegee’s high school paper, The Tiger’s Purr, “mould[ing] her into the complete character, desired by many, but attained by only the few who have the courage, such as that of Nell’s, to carry it through.”64

If Coachman’s success swung open previously cracked doors to coaches and underclassmen alike, it also pointed up the bleaker side of Jim Crow. She returned to her hometown of Albany, Georgia its first Olympic medalist—indeed, its first resident to win any prestigious award. Yet municipal administrators refused to desegregate Albany on “Alice Coachman Day,” forbade Coachman from speaking, and sequestered her off stage to receive flowers.65 Despite The Chicago Defender’s assertion that Albany had “put its color and race distinctions away in mothballs” to laud Coachman’s achievement, city leaders hosted an event that hewed to historic social restrictions, leaving the responsibility for a celebration designed to showcase Coachman to Albany State College, the segregated institution she attended.66 In 1948, her success proved an awkward moment for Albany leaders, who felt obliged to celebrate their new celebrity, yet ashamed to be represented by a poor black woman. White townspeople who also felt this dilemma resolved it by sending Coachman flowers and presents anonymously. Bouquets of roses filled her parents’ home, all sent by unnamed white local residents proud of her achievement. “But they couldn’t let people know, their peers, to know that they were sending

64 “Nell Comes Back Home,” Tuskegee (Ala.) Tiger’s Purr, December 3, 1948, p. 1, Box 1, Nell Jackson Papers, TUA.
flowers to this black woman,” remembered Coachman. “I got two pieces of jewelry.”\textsuperscript{67}

Like Coachman’s slight in Albany, travel to national meets pointed up the racism Tuskegee tracksters labored under, despite the success they had built using the Tuskegee ideology—emphasizing, in their perception, the continued need for Washingtonian behavior. Again Abbott and his wife led the team in perpetuating the school’s long-held portrait of accommodation in white spaces, but more personal or private efforts at resistance. Road trips were keenly felt Jim Crow encounters because multiple points reminded the Tigerettes of their second-class status. Yet the Abbotts chose to make these drives agency building experiences for the women runners.

Group empowerment emanated from the top down. When the Tigerettes embarked on road trips to meets, the Abbotts set the tone by creating a homelike atmosphere for their charges, the youngest of whom were high school sophomores. “We bought food at the better grocery stores….and then we would have a picnic lunch,” Jessie Abbott remembered.\textsuperscript{68} She also served warm dinners: “I would set [canned foods] on the hot radiator of the car and they would heat, so we’d have something hot to eat.”\textsuperscript{69} Although eating alongside the highway was inconvenient, uncomfortable, and a reminder of their Jim Crow status, black coaches and women athletes made meal times into collective teambuilding moments. Similarly, Abbot utilized the school’s widespread alumni network on overnight trips. The team found “nice accommodations in private negro homes” as far west as Fort Worth, Texas.\textsuperscript{70}

Despite coaches’ efforts to make trips pleasant, Jim Crow loomed large. “Hitting the fields” in lieu of public restroom use, an issue of particular pertinence to athletes for whom hydration was essential, proved particularly humiliating.\textsuperscript{71} Despite this double standard, the women remained acutely aware that upon arrival at their destinations, they were expected to perform at elite levels. The irony that America’s best sprinters won regional, national, and

\textsuperscript{67} NVLP Coachman Interview.
\textsuperscript{68} Jessie Abbott transcript, p. 15.
\textsuperscript{69} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{70} Jessie Abbott transcript, p. 34.
\textsuperscript{71} Service station proprietors’ hospitality remained resolutely white into the 1960s, although unlike restaurants or hotels, they sold their primary commodity, gasoline, to both black and white patrons. Since few roadside service stations provided bathrooms for African-American customers, the women had to relieve themselves, whether day or night, in fields and woods. Jessie Abbott transcript, p. 15. Also, see: Tigerbelles coach Edward Stanley Temple, interview with author, October 23, 2008; 1960s Tigerbelle Wyomia Tyus, interview with author, March 6, 2009; Alice Coachman, interview with author, February 4, 2011. Interviews in author’s possession.
international prizes year after year while competing under such conditions demonstrates the effectiveness of their team dynamic and determination to excel—rather than simply endure—in the southern social environment.

Though Abbott fostered this determination, the students’ own agency also buoyed the team through racist challenges. White ridicule was a regular feature of their travels. The women athletes, though prevented by personal safety and team reputation from openly responding, chose to react within the confines of their station wagon. This passive resistance relieved tension that whites’ verbal assaults caused and enabled the women to close ranks, supporting one another as teammates and black southerners in a vulnerable environment. Jessie Abbott remembered one particularly “amusing incident” en route to a Connecticut meet in the early 1950s:

…the we passed a truckload of little while children, and of course, they were hollering, “Nigger, nigger, nigger,” and making ugly faces. At that time we had a little tiny girl who was one of the best athletes and 100-meter dash champion. …When Major speeded on past that truckload of children, this little girl put her hands up to make a donkey’s ears and made an ugly face, and said, “Aghh, aghh, aghh.”

By mocking the whites, the “little girl,” Juanita Watson, reestablished the team’s confidence after racial slurs had threatened to undermine their self-worth. That one of the youngest Tigerettes led the reaction also speaks to the mindset of a postwar generation of black women runners who tolerated racism less than their parents had. Lamented Abbott, “I wanted to do that, but I [was] just too old.” By the early 1950s, team agency had grown increasingly adept at rebounding from callous racial prejudice. The Tigerettes’ national prominence at mid-century was crucial to this collective confidence.

The early 1950s marked the apotheosis of Tuskegee women’s track in the national consciousness. By mid-century the Tigerettes were ubiquitous in American and international track competition. Despite the racism they endured locally, their experiences abroad thrust them and their school into the public eye in an unprecedented way for black women. As the most successful coach in U.S. women’s track history, Abbott enjoyed unprecedented respect for a

72 Jessie Abbott transcript, p. 15.
73 Ibid.
74 School administrator Ross Owen crowed in the early 1960s that during the previous decade, the team had “won National and International honors,” triumphing in England, Chile, France, Argentina, Finland, and elsewhere. See: Ross C. Owen, “History of Athletics at Tuskegee Institute,” undated [ca. 1962], “Cleveland Leigh Abbott” section, File Cabinet Files, TUA, unpaginated.
black person in domestic sport. AAU track president Frances Kaszubski sought his opinion on
how United States women’s running should be administered. By 1956, former Tigerette Nell
Jackson had also attained national prominence as head coach of the women’s Olympic track
team. Tuskegee’s dominance in U.S. women’s sport seemed unshakable.

Despite the Tigerettes’ success at mid-century, two events led to their fall from power.
Abbott died on April 14, 1955, and the Tigerettes lost the national AAU championship later that
summer to a regional neighbor, Tennessee State University (TSU). Despite the Tigerettes’
downfall, this changing of the guard demonstrated the potency of Tuskegee Institute’s original
model. TSU’s coach, Edward Temple, built his own team by carefully imitating the framework
Abbott had applied to gendered sport for 26 years. Jessie Ellen Abbott, the Abbotts’ daughter,
cemented the transfer of her father’s methodology when she accepted a coaching position at TSU
for a short period. Politician and avid women’s track fan John P. Davis noted in retrospect of the
power shift that mid-century TSU “Tigerbelle” Mae Faggs “had picked up the torch in sprints
where Alice Coachman had left it.” Meanwhile the Tigerettes faded from national focus,
confined to regional sport for the remainder of the postwar years.

Coachman also fell into obscurity in the mid-1950s; her Coca-Cola billboards were
removed and forgotten in popular culture by mid-decade. Yet Coachman herself wound up
embracing Washingtonian ideology—returning to Albany, marrying, teaching, and coaching
girls’ track and field. She lived the Tuskegee philosophy in rural Georgia by sharing her
specialized training, and earned a stable living in the process. Although Coachman faded into
anonymity in the 1950s because of racism, lack of media coverage, and a dearth of women’s
professional competitive opportunity, black women track athletes moved beyond her as the TSU
Tigerbelles track program took over in Nashville. Ed Temple and his women runners would set
their own parameters for race and gender in sport for the next 20 years and, in doing so, would
attempt to redefine black women athletes’ femininity.

75 “Last Call To All Members of the AAU National Women’s Track and Field Committees,” 12 August 1956, TUA
177-002, Track and Field Papers, TUA, 1–2.
76 “Vita, Nell C. Jackson, Professor,” undated [ca. 1973], Box 1, Nell Jackson Papers, TUA, 1.
78 Manuscript draft notes for Jump High (never published as intended), n.d. [ca. 1972], SC Micro 5858, John P.
Davis Papers, SCRBC, reel 1, microfilm.
Anne Blaschke

Works Cited

Primary Sources

ARCHIVAL COLLECTIONS

AAU  Meeting Minutes, Bulletins, and Amateur Athlete collections, Amateur Athletic Union Archives, Orlando, Florida.

HST  Matthew J. Connelly Files, Staff Member and Office Files, Papers of Harry S. Truman, Harry S. Truman Presidential Library.


TSU  Vertical Files, Edward Temple, Newspaper Clipping Books collections, Tennessee State University Special Collections, Nashville, Tennessee.

TUA  Alice Coachman, Nell Jackson, Cleveland Abbott, Track and Field, Track and Field and Cross Country, Vertical Files collections, Tuskegee University Archives, Tuskegee, Alabama.

ORAL INTERVIEWS


———. Interview by Anne Blaschke, February 4, 2011, interview in author’s possession.

Temple, Edward. Interview by Anne Blaschke, October 23, 2008, interview in author’s possession.

Tyus, Wyomia. Interview by Anne Blaschke, March 6, 2009, interview in author’s possession.

NEWSPAPERS

Aurora: A Bi-Weekly Newspaper Published by Knoxville College (Knoxville, Tennessee)
Chicago Defender
New York Times
New York Daily Tribune
MAGAZINES AND JOURNALS

Amateur Athlete
Essence
Jet

PUBLISHED PRIMARY SOURCES

“Congratulations—Major Cleve L. Abbott, director of athletics at Tuskegee Institute, Ala., and discoverer of Miss Alice Coachman….” Chicago Defender, October 2, 1948, p. 47.


“NEGRO ACES VISIT TRUMAN; Footballs for Wilberforce Game Autographed by President.” New York Times, October 23, 1948, p. 11.


“Parade, Banquet Planned for Alice; Georgia City Will Fete Olympic Star.” Pittsburgh Courier, August 21, 1948, p. 4.


“Won’t Jump Again, Says Olympic Star; Alice is Given Royal Welcome.” Pittsburgh Courier, September 11, 1948, pp. 1, 4.

Secondary Sources


Anne Blaschke


Miller, Patrick B. “‘To Bring the Race Along Rapidly:’ Sport, Student Culture, and Educational Mission at Historically Black Colleges during the Interwar Years.” *History of Education Quarterly,* 35 (Summer 1995), 120–121.


