

Genre Biography

Essential Questions

How can overcoming obstacles make us better people?
When have you had to overcome an obstacle?



Queen OF THE Track

ALICE COACHMAN

Olympic High-Jump Champion

*by Heather Lang
illustrated by Floyd Cooper*



Alice Coachman was born to run and jump. On morning walks with her great-grandmother Rachel, Alice skipped ahead through the fields. She hopped on rocks. She vaulted over anything that got in her way.

As Alice got older, her papa told her to stop running and jumping. In the 1930s, running and jumping weren't considered ladylike. Besides, as one of ten children, Alice had lots of chores to do. She got up early to cook corn bread and eggs. After school, she washed the

clothes and hung them to dry. She picked cotton and peaches with her older brothers and sisters and took care of the younger children.

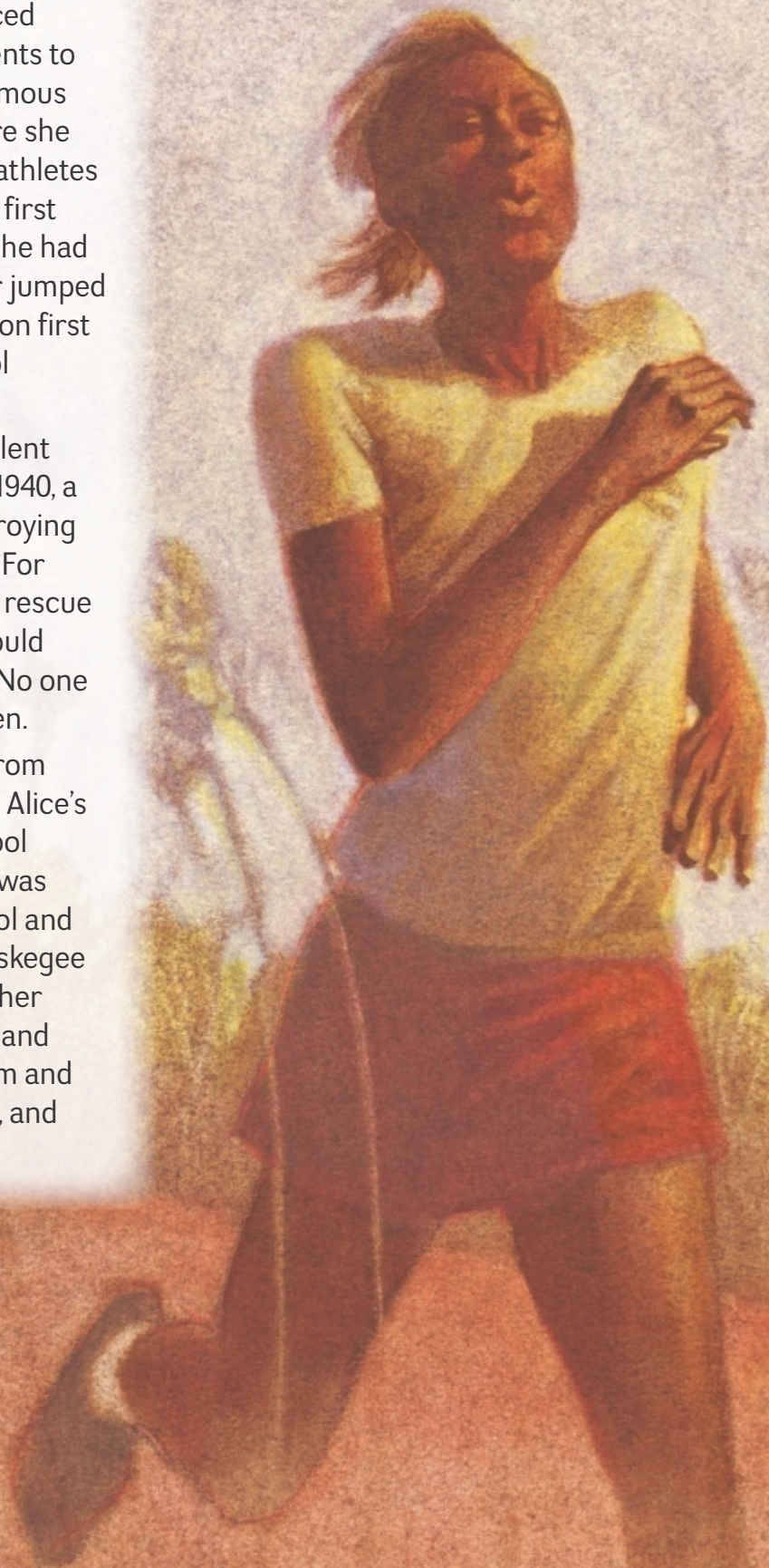
Still, all Alice could think about was running and jumping. So when she was done with her chores, she'd sneak off to play sports with the boys. People said she was a "crazy fool," and she knew Papa would punish her. But she couldn't pass up a chance to run and jump.

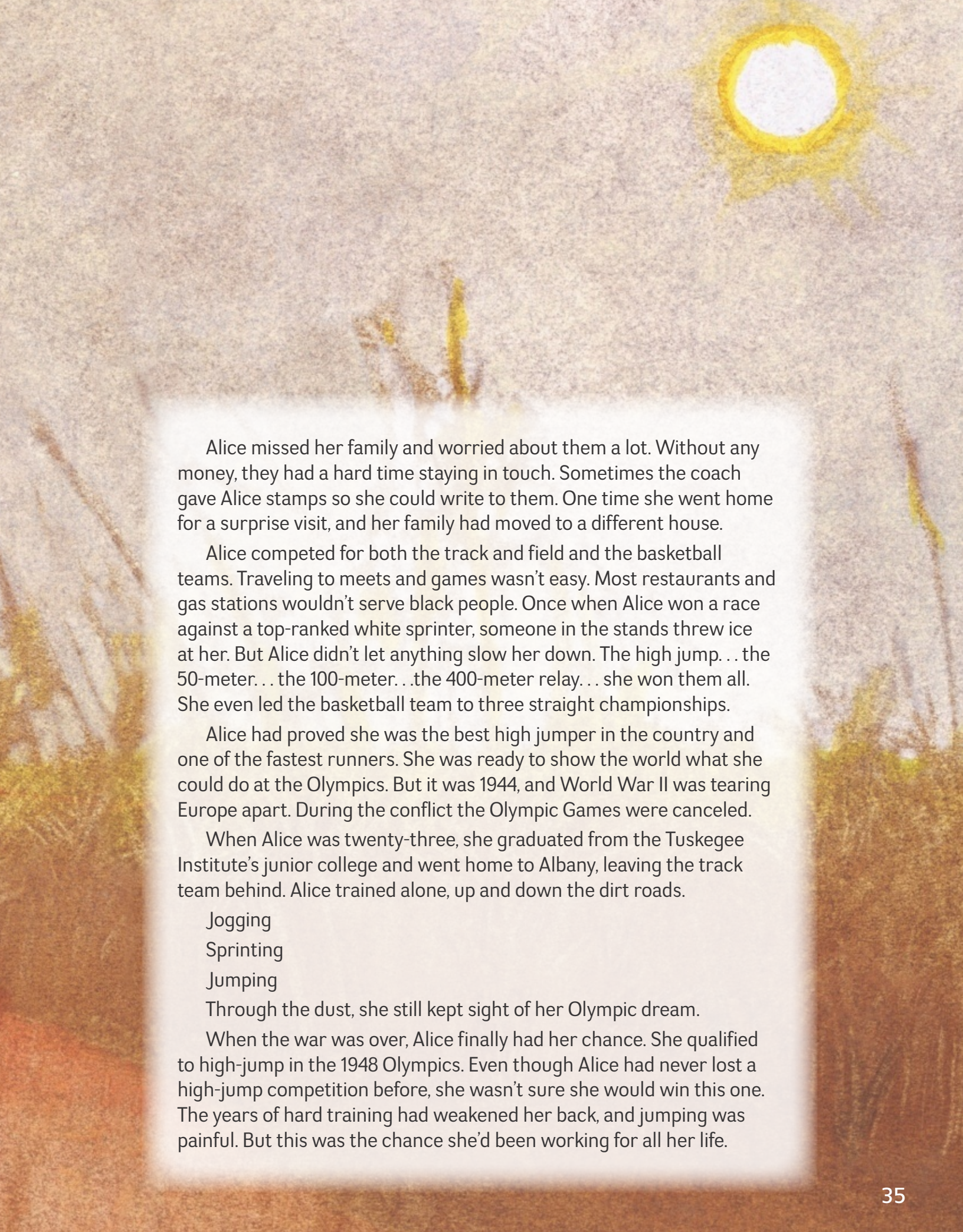
In Albany, Georgia, like most of the South, black people didn't have the same rights as white people. Most white people wouldn't even shake hands with a black person. Blacks couldn't sit where they wanted on buses, and they weren't allowed in many public places. There were no gyms, parks, and tracks where Alice could practice running and jumping. She didn't let that stop her. She ran barefoot on dirt roads. She collected sticks and tied rags together to make her own high jumps. Alice jumped so high, she soared like a bird above the cotton fields.

When Alice was in seventh grade, the high-school track coach noticed her talent. He convinced her parents to let her go with the team to the famous Tuskegee Relays in Alabama. There she could compete against top black athletes from all over the country. For the first time in her life, Alice left Albany. She had never worn track shoes before or jumped over a real high-jump bar. Alice won first place anyway, beating high-school and college girls.

Alice didn't use her running talent only to win ribbons. One night in 1940, a tornado twisted into Albany, destroying homes and injuring many people. For two weeks Alice volunteered as a rescue worker. She moved so fast, she could deliver food while it was still hot. No one thought Alice was a crazy fool then.

That year, the track coaches from the Tuskegee Institute persuaded Alice's parents to let her finish high school at Tuskegee. The all-black school was known for its excellent high school and college, as well as its athletics. Tuskegee gave Alice a scholarship to cover her tuition. In exchange for her room and board, she cleaned the gymnasium and pool, rolled the clay tennis courts, and sewed uniforms.





Alice missed her family and worried about them a lot. Without any money, they had a hard time staying in touch. Sometimes the coach gave Alice stamps so she could write to them. One time she went home for a surprise visit, and her family had moved to a different house.

Alice competed for both the track and field and the basketball teams. Traveling to meets and games wasn't easy. Most restaurants and gas stations wouldn't serve black people. Once when Alice won a race against a top-ranked white sprinter, someone in the stands threw ice at her. But Alice didn't let anything slow her down. The high jump. . . the 50-meter. . . the 100-meter. . .the 400-meter relay. . . she won them all. She even led the basketball team to three straight championships.

Alice had proved she was the best high jumper in the country and one of the fastest runners. She was ready to show the world what she could do at the Olympics. But it was 1944, and World War II was tearing Europe apart. During the conflict the Olympic Games were canceled.

When Alice was twenty-three, she graduated from the Tuskegee Institute's junior college and went home to Albany, leaving the track team behind. Alice trained alone, up and down the dirt roads.

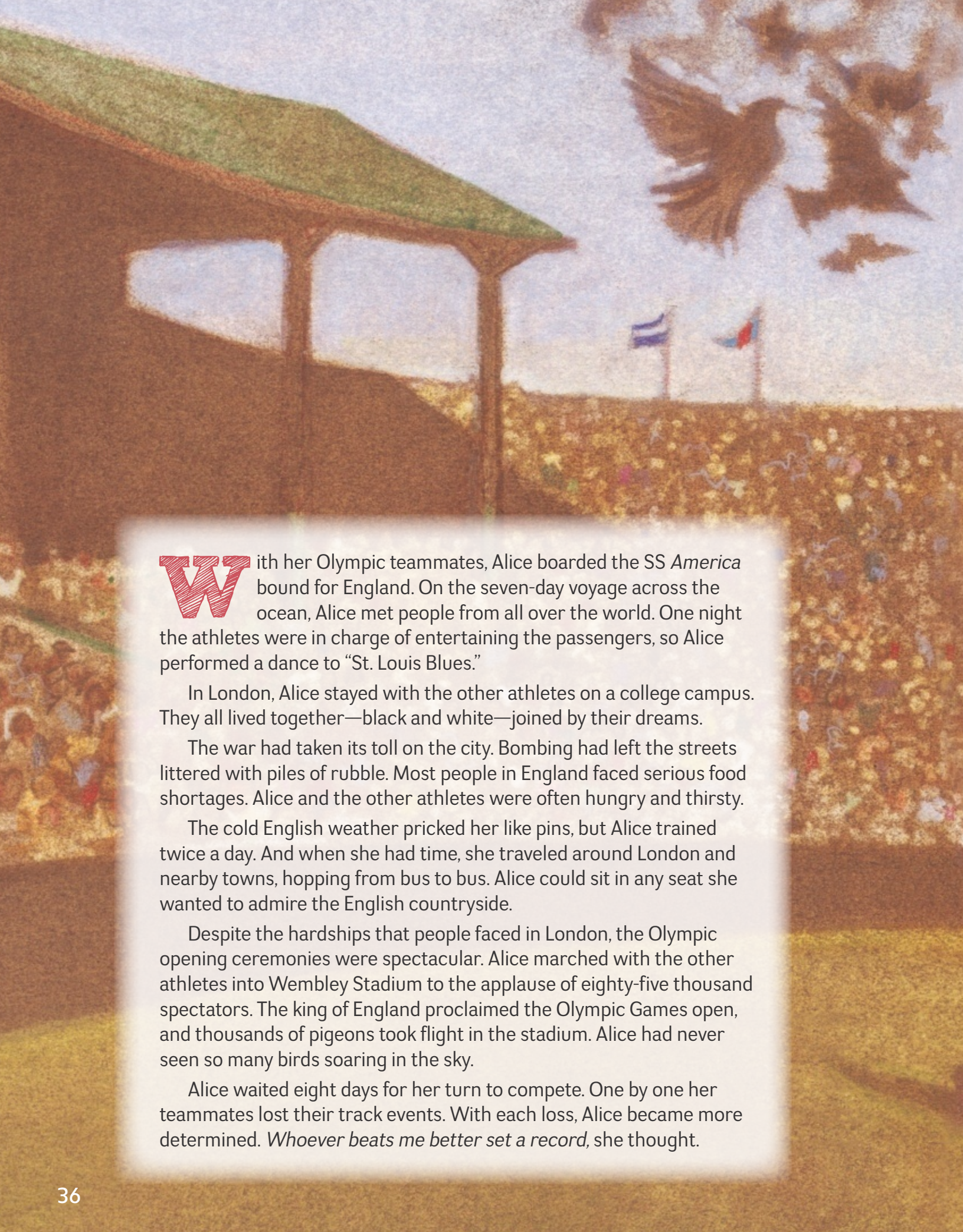
Jogging

Sprinting

Jumping

Through the dust, she still kept sight of her Olympic dream.

When the war was over, Alice finally had her chance. She qualified to high-jump in the 1948 Olympics. Even though Alice had never lost a high-jump competition before, she wasn't sure she would win this one. The years of hard training had weakened her back, and jumping was painful. But this was the chance she'd been working for all her life.



With her Olympic teammates, Alice boarded the *SS America* bound for England. On the seven-day voyage across the ocean, Alice met people from all over the world. One night the athletes were in charge of entertaining the passengers, so Alice performed a dance to “St. Louis Blues.”


In London, Alice stayed with the other athletes on a college campus. They all lived together—black and white—joined by their dreams.

The war had taken its toll on the city. Bombing had left the streets littered with piles of rubble. Most people in England faced serious food shortages. Alice and the other athletes were often hungry and thirsty.

The cold English weather pricked her like pins, but Alice trained twice a day. And when she had time, she traveled around London and nearby towns, hopping from bus to bus. Alice could sit in any seat she wanted to admire the English countryside.

Despite the hardships that people faced in London, the Olympic opening ceremonies were spectacular. Alice marched with the other athletes into Wembley Stadium to the applause of eighty-five thousand spectators. The king of England proclaimed the Olympic Games open, and thousands of pigeons took flight in the stadium. Alice had never seen so many birds soaring in the sky.

Alice waited eight days for her turn to compete. One by one her teammates lost their track events. With each loss, Alice became more determined. *Whoever beats me better set a record*, she thought.

A painting of a young woman in a white, sleeveless, short-sleeved dress holding a flaming torch aloft. The background is a textured wall with a sign that reads: "THE IMPORTANT THING IN THE OLYMPIC GAMES IS NOT WINNING BUT TAKING PART. THE ESSENTIAL THING IN LIFE IS NOT CONQUERING BUT FIGHTING WELL." The scene is set in a stadium-like environment with a green field and a building in the background.

THE IMPORTANT THING IN
THE OLYMPIC GAMES IS NOT
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THE ESSENTIAL THING IN
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BUT FIGHTING WELL.

Alice was America's last hope for a gold medal in women's track and field. Her toughest competition was Dorothy Tyler from Great Britain. Inch by inch they battled it out— 5 feet $3\frac{2}{5}$ inches, 5 feet $4\frac{1}{2}$ inches. The sand in the landing pit was thinning out and the landings were tough on Alice's back. 5 feet $5\frac{1}{3}$ inches.

Even though it was getting late and all the other competitions were over, the king and queen of England and thousands of spectators stayed to watch.

At 5 feet $6\frac{1}{8}$ inches, the bar was as tall as Alice. She'd never jumped that high in a competition before.

Alice focused on the jump.

She sprinted, pumping her arms.

She pushed off and flew. . . up. . . soaring. . . over the bar.

Her leap set a new Olympic record!

Dorothy jumped. . . and missed. But a jumper gets three tries to clear each height, and Dorothy cleared the bar on her second attempt.

The officials raised the bar to 5 feet and 7 inches. Alice jumped and missed. Dorothy missed, too. After three attempts, neither athlete cleared the bar.

Alice wasn't sure what would happen next. There are no ties in the high jump at the Olympics. Then she saw her name on the board. "1 COACHMAN—UNITED STATES." Alice won because she had made the record-breaking jump on her first try.

On August 7, 1948, Alice Coachman from Albany, Georgia, became the first African American woman to win an Olympic gold medal. As thousands cheered, she stepped onto the podium. She had achieved her dream—a dream that started with a little girl running and jumping barefoot in the fields of Georgia.

The king of England presented her with the gold medal. "I'm very proud of you," he said. "Congratulations." Then King George VI shook Alice's hand.





More about Alice Coachman

For most athletes, the greatest challenge is to master their sport. But for Alice Coachman, hurling herself over a 5-foot-6 $\frac{1}{8}$ -inch bar was far from her biggest obstacle. Born in 1922, Alice grew up very poor. She lived in Georgia, where black people were treated unfairly. Banned from public places, Southern black children weren't allowed to participate in most organized sports. To make matters worse, in the 1930s girls were expected to help with housework and be dainty. Alice's father punished her severely for sneaking off to run and jump. However, looking back, Alice believed that these enormous challenges gave her the determination and toughness she needed to become a successful Olympic athlete.

An exceptional runner and jumper, Alice earned nicknames such as "Queen of the Track," "Atomic Alice," "Track Ace," and the "Tuskegee Flash." She likely would have won several gold medals at the 1940 and 1944 Olympics, but both were canceled because of World War II.

After winning the gold medal, Alice returned to her hometown as a heroine. It was rare in Georgia to hold a celebration for a black person, but a special day was organized for her. A parade stretched for 175 miles. Yet segregation was still alive in the South. At her welcome-home ceremony, Alice was not invited to speak to the crowd. Whites sat on one side of the auditorium and blacks on the other. The mayor didn't even shake her hand. Still Alice felt support from many white people, who sent her anonymous gifts of congratulations through the mail.

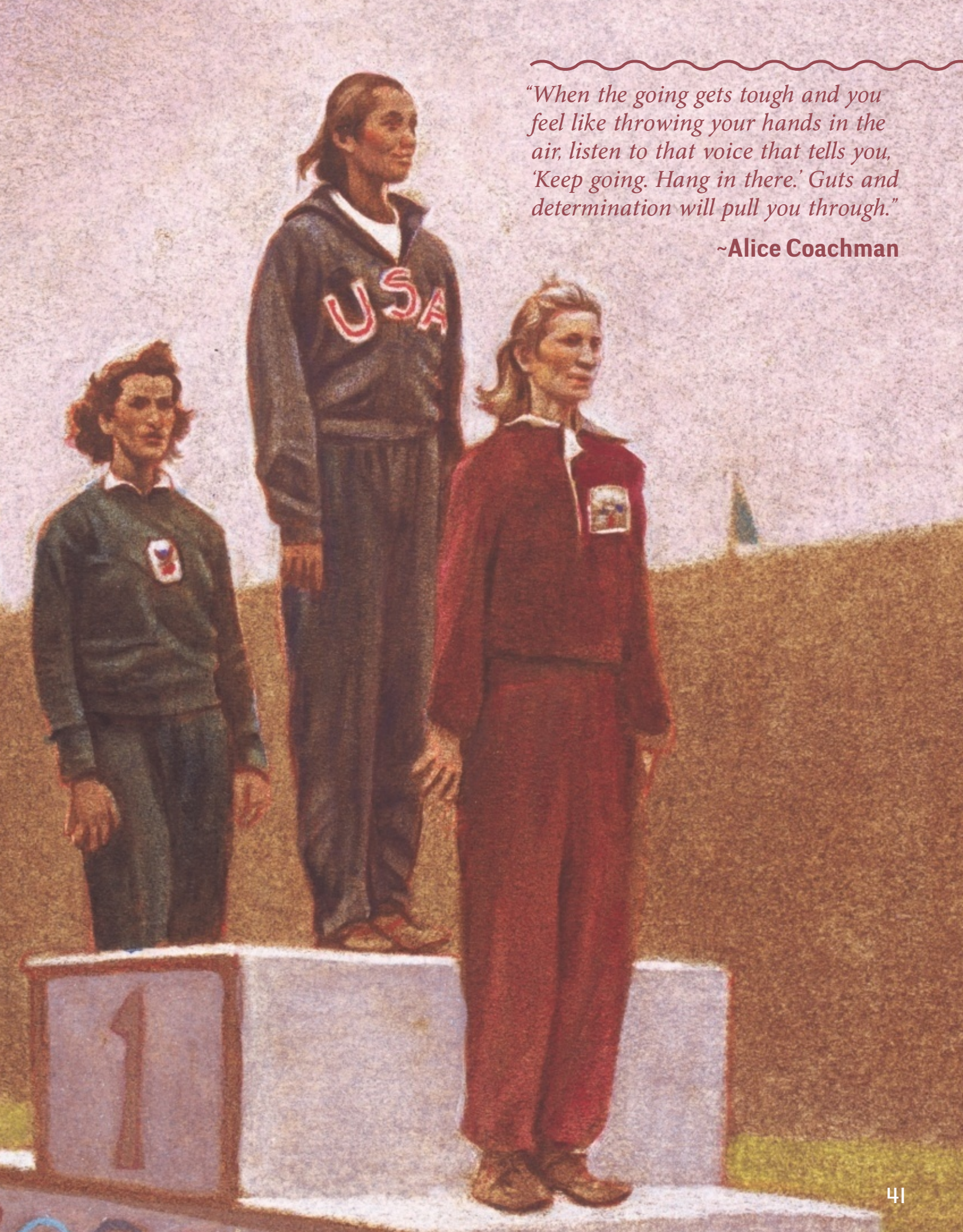
Alice stopped competing after the 1948 Olympics but continued to accomplish great things. She went on to get her college degree from Albany State College. She became a community volunteer, a mother, a teacher, and a coach. She was the first black woman to endorse an international product when she was featured on a billboard. Named to eight halls of fame, Alice won ten straight U.S. national outdoor high-jump championships, a record that still stands today. In 1998, she was inducted as an honorary member of Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, the oldest Greek-lettered organization established by African American college-educated women.

Alice credits her success to the support she received from her family, teachers, coaches, and sometimes people she hardly knew. In an effort to give back and help others, she founded the Alice Coachman Track and Field Foundation, which supports young athletes and helps former Olympic athletes adjust to life after the games.

Many do not know Alice's story, since her gold medal came in the early days of broadcast television. But it was Alice Coachman who paved the way for future Olympic track stars such as Wilma Rudolph.

"When the going gets tough and you feel like throwing your hands in the air, listen to that voice that tells you, 'Keep going. Hang in there.' Guts and determination will pull you through."

~Alice Coachman



Essential Questions

Why should we respect people who have persevered?
How can we learn from their examples?

Mother to Son

by Langston Hughes

Well, son, I'll tell you:
Life for me ain't been no crystal stair.
It's had tacks in it,
And splinters,
And boards torn up,
And places with no carpet on the floor—
Bare.
But all the time
I've been a-climbin' on,
And reachin' landin's,
And turnin' corners,
And sometimes goin' in the dark
Where there ain't been no light.
So boy, don't you turn back.
Don't you set down on the steps
'Cause you finds it's kinder hard.
Don't you fall now—
For I've still goin', honey,
I've still climbin',
And life for me ain't been no crystal stair.



You will answer the comprehension questions on these pages as a class.

Text Connections

1. When a tornado ripped through her hometown, Alice Coachman used her speed to help out. Explain what she did to help. Draw conclusions about where she got this courage.
2. Explain one way in which Alice defied people's expectations of her.
3. Give details from "Mother to Son" to support the argument that moving forward in life sometimes requires perseverance.
4. When Alice qualified for the 1948 Olympics, she was not sure that she would win. Make a connection with a time when you doubted yourself.
5. Compare and contrast Lupe in "The Marble Champ" with Alice in "Queen of the Track."
6. In the 1930s, running and jumping were not considered "ladylike." Contrast this view with how people view those playful activities today. Give a specific example to support your answer.

Did You Know?

During the first seven Olympic games, only men competed in the high-jump. It was not until 1928, at the Olympic games in Amsterdam, in the Netherlands, that women had their own high-jump competition.



Write

The poem “Mother to Son” is written from a mother to her son. Write a short poem giving advice to someone younger than you based on an experience or struggle you have survived.

Look Closer

Keys to Comprehension

1. Make an inference about Alice Coachman’s relationship with her family. Support your inference with quotes from the text.
2. How did Alice respond to challenges in her life? Use details from the text to support your answer.
3. Based on how the speaker in “Mother to Son” describes life, what could be the poem’s theme?

Writer’s Craft

4. Based on text evidence in “Queen of the Track,” describe how a high-jump competition works.

Concept Development

5. Describe the evidence the author of “Queen of the Track” uses to support the idea that supportive people helped Alice succeed.
6. Write a few sentences about the way hard times make people feel by integrating information from both “Queen of the Track” and “Mother to Son.”



Read this Social Studies Connection. You will answer the questions as a class.

Text Feature

Subheads label small sections of a longer piece of writing. They help to organize the text.

Fighting Discrimination

Segregation

When Alice Coachman was growing up, black and white people were not allowed to go to the same schools, sit in the same seats on buses, or drink from the same water fountains. The idea of “separate but equal” also extended to other areas you might not think of, like hospitals. But hospitals for black Americans did not offer the best level of care. They were separate, but definitely not equal. Early on, some of these “hospitals” for African Americans were little more than a one-room building or an attic. Eventually, in an effort to provide better care for their community, African Americans began opening their own hospitals in their communities.

Black Hospitals

At the height of segregation, in the early 1960s, there were as many as 500 “black hospitals” throughout America.

Black hospitals were operated by African American doctors and served African American patients. They did not receive as much funding as white hospitals. The hospital campuses were small and under funded.

Today

After the desegregation of America’s hospitals in 1964, some African Americans began receiving better care at hospitals traditionally reserved for white people, and the number of black hospitals began to dwindle.

Today, you can count the number of remaining black hospitals in America on one hand. Still, their history remains as a reminder of the mixed legacy of race relations in the United States.



During the civil rights movement, African Americans protested for fair and equal housing, education, and healthcare.

1. Describe how segregation affected the quality of health care African Americans received.
2. Explain why “separate but equal” did not lead to equal access to care.
3. Although hospitals are desegregated, some people still cannot easily access quality medical care. How do you think people can work to bridge those gaps so everyone can benefit from science equally?



Go Digital

Riverside General Hospital in Houston, Texas, was established as a black hospital and is still operating today. Research the history of the hospital. How did it receive the funding necessary to remain in operation?