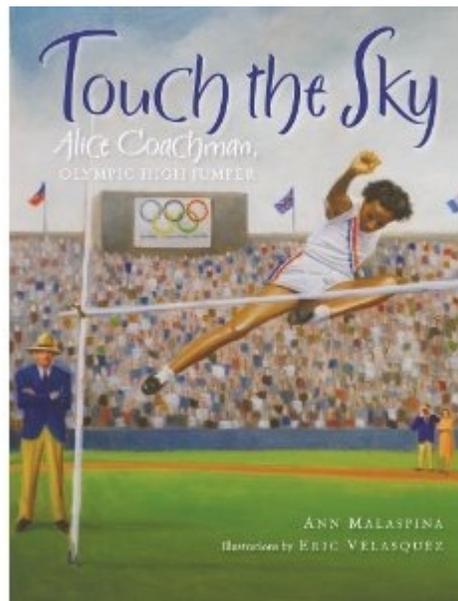


TEACHER'S GUIDE

TOUCH THE SKY ALICE COACHMAN, OLYMPIC HIGH JUMPER



ISBN: 9780807580356

Grade Level: 1-4

Age Level: 6-9

*“Fields shut.
Tracks shut.
Doors shut
to girls like Alice.
No place to practice.
No crossbar to raise.
Alice and her friends got busy.
Knotting rags.
Tying rags to sticks.
Planting sticks
in the red Georgia clay.
Then her friends stood back
and let Alice jump.”*

Themes

Personal Strength, Overcoming Injustice, Civil Rights, Family Love, Biography, Women in Sports, American Women, Olympic Games, African American History.

Synopsis

"Bare feet shouldn't fly. Long legs shouldn't spin. Braids shouldn't flap in the wind. 'Sit on the porch and be a lady,'" Papa scolded Alice. Few girls dreamed of being athletes when Alice Coachman was growing up in the Great Depression. In Albany, Georgia, no tracks or gyms were open to African American high jumpers. So Alice made her own crossbar with sticks and rags. With the support of her coach, friends, and community, Alice started to win medals on the high jump. Her wish to compete at the Olympics came true in 1948. This is an inspiring free-verse story of the first African-American woman to win an Olympic gold medal.

Teacher Tip

Touch the Sky can be read as part of a celebration of Black History Month in February and Women's History Month in March. As they learn about Alice Coachman, students may explore the similarities and connections between the Women's Rights Movement and the Civil Rights Movement, especially for African American female athletes.



Pre-Reading Discussions

Before reading *Touch the Sky* with the class, you can help students understand the times of the story. Alice was born in 1922 in the Deep South. She grew up in an era marked by both legalized segregation and the Great Depression. Also at that time, female athletes were struggling for acceptance and opportunities.

1. Alice's parents did not want her to be an athlete at first. Her father did not think it was "lady-like" to run and jump. Do people think the same way today?
2. Alice could not practice on public fields and tracks because of segregation laws. Her team could not stop at restaurants or restrooms when they traveled. How did segregation affect Alice's goal to become a top athlete?
3. What does it mean to have a dream? Do you have a goal or dream that you hope to achieve?
4. Why did the author call the story *Touch the Sky*? Do you think Alice really touches the sky?
5. The author wrote the story in free verse. Explain free verse and ask students to listen for repetitions and word patterns as they read.
6. Illustrations are important in a picture book. Ask students to look at the illustrations for clues about the historical setting of the story.

OLYMPIC FIRSTS

Track stars Louise Stokes and Tydia Pickett were the first African-American women to be chosen for a U.S. Olympic team. At the 1932 Summer Olympics in Los Angeles, they qualified for track and field events, but stayed on the bench because the coach entered only white team members in the events.



After Reading



Ideas for Discussion

1. What made Alice's parents change their minds about her becoming an athlete?
2. How did the Great Depression affect Alice and her family?
3. Why were the Tuskegee Relays for black athletes only? Was that good for Alice or not?
4. Alice always sucked on a lemon before the race. Why did she do that? Do you do something special to prepare for big events in your life?
5. Alice's mother told her to "stay humble." Why did she say that?
6. Many people helped Alice in her journey to the Olympic gold. Who are the people in your life that help you reach your goals?
7. Alice was the first black woman in the world to win an Olympic gold medal. Why do you think that none had come before her?
8. What qualities helped Alice to reach her goal of an Olympic gold?
9. Alice was a hero when she came home from the Olympics, yet she found that many things hadn't changed. Her home town was still segregated. How do you think that made her feel?

10. Did Alice really “touch the sky?” What does the sky symbolize? Look for other symbols in this story.

Classroom Activities



Language Arts

1. Have students pretend they are reporters covering the London Summer Olympics in 1948. See website links below. Ask them to write a news story about the high jump competition.
2. Students can write a letter to Alice Coachman, asking her questions about her life.
3. Invite students to retell the story of *Touch the Sky* in the first-person point of view.
4. Ask students to write a free verse poem about one of their heroes or heroines. Have them use repetition, effective language, varied line length, and punctuation to create form and rhythm.
5. Verbs are important in *Touch the Sky*. Ask students to find the verbs and write a short story using all the verbs.
6. Have students create their own picture book biography of a favorite person. Make sure to use illustrations to help tell the story.

THE HIGH JUMP AT THE OLYMPICS

The men's high jump competition was held at the first modern Olympics in Athens, Greece in 1896. Women competed in the high jump starting in 1928 at the Summer Olympic Games in the Netherlands.





Social Studies

1. Alice Coachman grew up during the era of Jim Crow, a set of laws and social customs that separated the races and made African Americans live as second-class citizens. Alice attended segregated schools and could not practice on public tracks or fields. Have students research a Jim Crow law, and write a story about how it affected one person's life.
2. Use *Touch the Sky* as a jumping off point to study the Olympic Games. Find other books about Olympic champions, and share them with the class. What do the athletes have in common? How are they different?
3. Alice grew up during the Great Depression. Read about the Great Depression and how families had to adapt and go without essentials. Sometimes children had to help out, as Alice did by taking jobs after school. Write a diary entry about life during the Great Depression.
4. Reflect on how practice, sacrifice and discipline helped Alice reach her goal. Pick a famous person in history and describe what they did to achieve their dream.
5. World War II put the Olympics on hold for eight years (1940 and 1944 Games were cancelled). Have students research the reasons the Games were cancelled, and what it meant to some of the top athletes of that time.



Art

1. Make a class mural showing scenes in *Touch the Sky* to display in the hallway.
2. Have students make a graphic story about their favorite sport or hobby, using dialogue and cartoon art.

3. Draw a painting of Alice doing the high jump.
4. Make a poster for the next Olympic Games.
5. Sketch a map of Alice's journey from Albany, Georgia to London, England.
6. Paint a still life of lemons or other fruits.



Physical Education

1. Have students build their own high jump using sticks and string, and practice jumping over it.
2. Organize an Olympics at the school with several events.
3. Alice was a sprinter for the championship Tuskegee Golden Tigerettes relay team. Organize a relay race with four children on each team. Each child runs once around the gym or track, and hands the baton to the next child.
4. Alice always stretched before she competed. Make stretching exercises a part of the classroom's activities each day.
5. Alice's coaches were important to her success as an athlete. Have students take turns being the "Coach" and lead the class in an activity.
6. For a math exercise, look at this list of women's high jump Olympic gold medal winners, and make a graph showing how they changed.

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|------|-------------------|-----|-------------|
| 1928 | Ethel Catherwood | CAN | 1.59 meters |
| 1932 | Jean Shiley | USA | 1.66 |
| 1936 | Iboylya Csak | HUN | 1.60 |
| 1948 | Alice Coachman | USA | 1.68 |
| 1952 | Esther Brand | SAF | 1.67 |
| 1956 | Millie McDaniel | USA | 1.76 |
| 1960 | Iolanda Balas | ROM | 1.85 |
| 1964 | Iolanda Balias | ROM | 1.90 |
| 1968 | Miloslava Rezkova | CZE | 1.82 |
| 1972 | Ulrike Meyfarth | FRG | 1.92 |

WHAT HAPPENED FIRST?

- ___ Alice and the Tuskegee Golden Tigerettes must eat at the side of the road.
- ___ Her father tells her to sit on the porch and act like a young lady.
- ___ The 1940 and 1944 Olympics are cancelled during World War II.
- ___ Alice wins the gold medal at the 1948 London Summer Olympics.
- ___ She plays basketball with the boys.
- ___ President Harry S. Truman invites Alice to the White House
- ___ Coach Cleve Abbott asks her father to allow Alice to enroll at Tuskegee Institute and train with the Golden Tigerettes.
- ___ Alice brings home her first national medal.
- ___ No one else on her Olympic team wins a gold medal.
- ___ Alice is born in Albany, Georgia in 1922.
- ___ Her father agrees she can go to Tuskegee and join the Golden Tigerettes.
- ___ Alice's friends help her make a high jump from sticks and string.
- ___ The U.S. enters World War II.

Links for further research

Alice Coachman Foundation <http://www.alicecoachmen.com>

1948 London Olympics <http://www.olympic.org/london-1948-summer-olympics>

United States Olympic Committee <http://www.teamusa.org/>

Women's High Jump <http://www.olympic.org/athletics-high-jump-women>

The history of Jim Crow <http://www.pbs.org/wnet/jimcrow/>



MEET THE AUTHOR AND THE ILLUSTRATOR



AUTHOR Ann Malaspina grew up in Brooklyn, New York, and Westport, Connecticut. Her father emigrated from Greece after World War II. Her mother was a fifth grade teacher. After graduating from Kenyon College, she worked as a newspaper reporter in Massachusetts, where she learned to meet deadlines. Ann has written over twenty nonfiction and fiction books, including *Yasmin's Hammer*, winner of the Asian Pacific American Library Association award for picture book in 2011. *Finding Lincoln* (Albert Whitman & Co.) was an IRA Teacher's Choice, Notable Social Studies Trade Book for Young People, Skipping Stones Honor Book, and a Paterson Prize for Books for Young People. Ann got the idea for *Touch the Sky* at the 1998 Summer Olympics in Atlanta, Georgia, where Alice Coachman was honored as one of the one hundred great Olympic athletes. She won a grant from the Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators to research her story. Alice's son, Richmond Davis, helped with information and support. Ann's website: www.annmalaspina.com.



ILLUSTRATOR Eric Velasquez, the son of Afro-Puerto Rican parents, was born in Spanish Harlem and grew up in Harlem in New York City. As a child, his love for doodling and drawing was strongly encouraged by his mother. From his grandmother he inherited a love of music and from his father he developed a love of movies. Growing up in this setting, Eric says, "Becoming an artist was a natural choice for me. I have never thought of being anything else." Eric won the 1999 Coretta Scott King/John Steptoe Award for new talent for *The Piano Man* by Debbie Chocolate. He has illustrated many beautiful children's books, including *Liberty Street*, *Champion: The Story of Muhammed Ali*, and *Jesse Owens: The Fastest Man Alive*. Eric's website: www.ericvelasquez.com