

## Lesson Five Overview

### The Story of Ibtihaj Muhammad

*Description:*

The class will read aloud the prologue to Ibtihaj Muhammad's book *Proud: My Fight for an Unlikely American Dream*, which introduces her narrative as the first U.S. Olympic athlete to wear a hijab while competing. After answering comprehension questions about the passage and discussing the importance of Muhammad's message, students will do a gallery walk around the classroom and react to four statements that appear throughout the rest of her book. To conclude the lesson, students will discuss the ideas of defying expectations and being proud of one's identity through class reflection prompts.

The text adheres to a simple narrative structure and focuses on the stories, experiences, and beliefs of Ibtihaj Muhammad. Relationships between some themes may be intricate and subtle, and should be explored through discussion and reflection. Some names and vocabulary are subject-specific, but the text mostly comprises terms familiar to students or supported by context clues. While the passage adheres to the themes of identity and perseverance, the lesson pushes students to expand on these topics through discussion of personal experiences.

*Written below is the passage from Proud that students will be reading as a class and analyzing.*

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*Passage begins on the next page.*

## Prologue to *Proud: My Fight for an Unlikely American Dream*

“Muhammad...?” her voice trailed off. The substitute teacher, Ms. Winter, squinted and brought the list of names on the attendance sheet closer to her face. She was stuck, and I could guess why. She was looking at the seven letters in my first name and wondering how to pronounce it.

“Is your last name Muhammad?” she asked, her eyes fixed on me, the only fourth grader in the classroom wearing a hijab, who happened to be sitting in the front row.

“Yes.” I nodded. My eyes stayed glued in front of me.

“And how do you pronounce your first name, young lady?” she asked.

“It’s Ib-ti-haj,” I said, pronouncing each syllable as slowly as possible. “It’s pronounced just like it’s written,” I added. That usually helped people understand how to say my name, but it didn’t help Ms. Winter. She made another face, the kind of face you make when your mouth lands on something bitter.

“Oh, that’s too hard,” she said, shaking her head no and scribbling something down on the attendance sheet. “We’re going to call you Ibtī.”

“Okay,” I said aloud, but the way she said “Ibtī” made my cheeks burn. I refused to turn my head to see if my classmates were laughing at me or, worse, pitying me for having a name that was too hard to pronounce.

During recess, I did some quick calculating in my head to be sure, but I was right. My friend Jennifer had eight letters in her name, and Elizabeth Brewster had nine in hers, and yet their names weren’t “too hard.” Their names didn’t require shortening. Why did mine? Ibtihaj was the easiest name in the world to pronounce. All my friends could say it, and they were all only nine years old like me. Ms. Winter didn’t even try to say my name.

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The truth is, for as far back as I can remember, this sort of confusion has existed about who I am, and it always starts with my name. Ibtihaj. “How do you say it?” “What does it mean?” And then the way I identify myself leaves some people perplexed: Black but Muslim. Muslim but American. Hijabi but an athlete. I’ve walked into many rooms and stood on stages where it was clear people didn’t know what to make of me. When no one knows where you fit into the social order of color and creed, confusion ensues until order is restored. Until people understand who you really are; that is when they stop and listen.

And that’s why I wrote *Proud*. I want people to understand who *I* really am and maybe other Americans like me who feel the same, to get to know the journey behind the headlines of the “first US athlete to compete in the Olympic Games wearing hijab.” I wrote this book because I wanted to chronicle my quest to challenge society’s limited perceptions of what a Muslim woman, a Black woman, or an athlete can be.

I want people to know that much of my strength as an athlete comes from how high I had to climb to release myself from society’s boxes and show up to the party even when an invitation was never extended to me. Along the way, I had to learn how to be tough and tenacious or risk

losing the fight before it even started. I had to maximize my expectations for myself because no one else would, and I had to have the guts to pursue what I wanted even though it meant charting my own path. I didn't have any role models to look up to who looked like me in fencing, and there weren't any other Muslim women wearing hijab at the elite levels of sport to inspire my quest. I had myself, my family, and my faith, and that was enough for me to persist.

*Proud* may seem like a familiar story, as this path I'm on was forged by the men and women who came before me—Muhammad Ali, Jackie Robinson, John Carlos, Althea Gibson, Serena and Venus Williams, Mahmoud Abdul-Rauf—athletes who defied the naysayers and triumphed over mountains of adversity. They had barriers thrust in front of them and doors slammed in their faces, yet they still triumphed both on and off the court. I hope that, when reading *Proud*, anyone who has had an opportunity taken from them because of their race, religion, or gender can find solace in these pages. I hope people feel empowered by my fight and know that they have every right to demand a place at the table of whatever life is offering.

If someone had told me that my life would unfold the way it has—full of untold blessings and endless opportunities—because I picked up a sword in high school at thirteen years old, I would have called him or her a liar. But I did pick up that sword, and despite the uphill battle, it has been a rewarding journey. It is my hope that everyone finds their own sword to wield in a way that brings them happiness and success, and that the word “no” becomes their motivation to press forward. *Inshallah*, so may it be.