

Wilma

Rudolph

(1940-)



Wilma Rudolph captivated the sporting world in 1960 by winning three gold medals at the Rome Olympics. She sprinted to victories in the 100 and 200 meter dashes, having previously set world's records in both events. No American woman, before or since, has taken three gold medals in Olympic track—and Wilma Rudolph had been unable to walk until she was eight years old.

She was born in St. Bethlehem, Tennessee, the twentieth of twenty-two children, to Ed and Blanche Rudolph. At the age of four, Wilma was stricken with scarlet fever complicated by pneumonia. These diseases left her right leg useless.

Once a week for two years, Mrs. Rudolph and Wilma traveled to Nashville where Wilma received treatment. Every night, after Wilma was asleep, Mrs. Rudolph would massage her leg. When she was eight, Wilma began to walk with the aid of a brace. At eleven, she would walk normally and finally was able to participate in sports.

Basketball was her first love. She became a star player at Burt High School in Clarksville, Tennessee. As a sophomore, she scored 803 points, a state record, and once she made 45 points in a single game, another record.

At a tournament in Nashville, Wilma caught the eye of Ed Temple, track coach at Tennessee State University. Temple was refereeing women's basketball games. He recognized track talent even if he saw it on a basketball court. Wilma had no idea that she could run. Yet she was highly motivated to excel at sports which she could not play as a child.

At fourteen, she enrolled in Temple's summer track program. In 1956, she ran the Olympics held in Melbourne, Australia. She won a bronze medal as a member of the third-place 4 by 100 relay team.

In the fall, she returned to high school and continued to run track and play basketball. In her senior year, Wilma became pregnant. "I graduated in May; Yolanda was born in July, and I entered Tennessee State in

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September." Her pregnancy forced a break in Wilma's training, and she missed the entire 1958 season. She worked "extra hard" to build up her stamina.

By 1960, Wilma had become the best woman sprinter in the world. She set her first world's record at the Olympic Trials in Abilene, Texas. By the end of the year, she held indoor and outdoor records in the 100 and 200 meter runs. She won her three gold medals before the cheering crowds of Rome.

Wilma's two great competitive years were 1960 and 1961. She won nearly every top sports trophy awarded, including the Associated Press Award as Female Athlete of the Year, the Helms World Trophy, and the prestigious James E. Sullivan Trophy.

Wilma set several new world's records in 1961. She was thronged by her fans wherever she went during the European summer track season. In Cologne, Germany, mounted police had to hold admirers back, and in Berlin fans stole the shoes off her feet.

Wilma retired from competition after the 1961 season. She returned to Tennessee State where she earned a B.S. degree in Education. As a teacher and athletic coach she tried to pass on her special skills to hundreds of young competitors.

Today Wilma is busier and more involved than ever. Her autobiography, *Wilma*, was published in 1977, and she was a special consultant for the filming of a television movie based on the book. In 1977, she was awarded the Outstanding Tennessean Award for her civic contributions to the state.

Wilma and her husband, Robert Eldridge, have four children. Presently she is studying for an advance degree in Business Administration. "By 1984, I hope to be one of the top Black businesswomen in the United States. That's my next challenge." Not content to rest on her laurels, Wilma Rudolph would like to be remembered as more than a runner.

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