



Wilma Glodean Rudolph

# Wilma Rudolph

## Champion and Role Model

by Daphne Myers

*“The potential for greatness lives within each of us.”*

Wilma Rudolph raced into the history books in the 1960 Summer Olympics in Rome when she became the first American woman to win three gold medals in track and field during a single Olympic Games.

She was born Wilma Glodean Rudolph, the 20th of 22 children in a very large and very poor family. Her father, Ed Rudolph, had 11 children by an earlier marriage, and he had 8 more with Wilma’s mother, Blanche Rudolph, before Wilma was born on June 23, 1940, near Clarksville, Tennessee. A premature baby, born at four and a half months and weighing just 4.5 pounds, Wilma was frail, thin, and sickly. At age four, she developed double pneumonia and scarlet fever followed by polio, which left her left leg paralyzed for most of her childhood and forced her to wear a leg brace.

*“My doctors told me I would never walk again. My mother told me I would. I believed my mother.”*

Her father worked as a railroad porter and did odd jobs, and her mother worked six days a week as a maid. Her mother especially had a deep Christian faith and taught Wilma that God had a purpose for her life. Twice a week for two years, Wilma made the 90-mile round-trip bus ride with her mother or an aunt from their home to a hospital for blacks in Nashville, where she received heat and water therapy on the leg. Her brothers and sisters also massaged her leg every day, and the whole family prayed together every night for Wilma’s leg to get better.

At age nine, Wilma removed the brace one Sunday in church and took a step that the doctor told her she could never take. By age 11, Wilma walked without any sign of a prior disability. At age 15 she walked the aisle of her church and made a commitment to Jesus. Church, she said, was the only place in the segregated South “that said to black people come, we’ve got a place for you with no questions asked.”

With great faith, determination, and physical therapy, Wilma not only walked again, she ran with ever increasing strength. In her first high school track season, at age 13, Wilma ran five different events. In 20 different races, she won every event. She also played basketball, and in her sophomore year of high school, she scored 803 points in 25 games—then a state record in girls’ basketball.

Rudolph began competing in Amateur Athletic Union (AAU) track meets with the women’s team from Tennessee State University. At the nationals in 1955, baseball great Jackie Robinson saw her run and told the 15 year old, “One day you’re going to be the world’s fastest woman.” Wilma qualified for the 1956 Summer Olympics team and went to the games in Melbourne, Australia, where at age 16, she

won a bronze medal as a member of the 4 X 100-meters relay team.

In Rome, after a practice session the day before competition began, Wilma tripped over a water main and severely sprained her ankle. Heavily taped, she still set a world record of 11.3 seconds in the 100-meter dash in the semifinals. Then she won the 100 in the final round with a time of 11.0. She broke the Olympic record in the 200-meter dash (23.2 seconds) in the semifinals; afterward she won the 200 in the final. She was part of the team that broke the world record in the 4 X 100-meters relay (44.4 seconds) in the semifinals before winning the relay in the final in 44.5 seconds. The 80,000 fans in Olympic stadium chanted “Wilma! Wilma! Wilma!” before and after each of her triumphs.

After the Olympics, over 40,000 people attended Wilma’s homecoming parade in Clarksville. Segregationist Tennessee governor Buford Ellington was to lead the parade and celebration but Wilma refused to participate in a segregated event, so the parade became the first integrated event in Clarksville’s history. It was only one of several protests she joined against the town’s segregation laws.

In 1961 Wilma was the first woman ever invited to such track meets as the Millrose Games, the Los Angeles Times Games, and the Drake Relays. At Stanford University, she won the 100-meter and a relay race against a Soviet Union team, then gave away her track shoes to a young fan and retired.

*“When I was going through my transition of being famous, I asked God, why was I here? What was my purpose? Surely, it wasn’t just to win three gold medals. There has to be more to this life than that.”*

After retirement, Rudolph made goodwill trips to west Africa, east Asia, and to Japan with evangelist Billy Graham and the Baptist Christian Athletes. However, even though she was world famous, good jobs were hard to come by. She taught elementary school in Clarksville while coaching high school track. She worked with young people in the Job Corps, was a consultant to university track teams, and was on a national radio sports show, but never made much money in those jobs.

In 1974 Wilma was inducted into the National Track and Field Hall of Fame and in 1983 into the U.S. Olympic Hall of Fame. She established the Wilma Rudolph Foundation to promote amateur athletics. She used her platform to inspire, motivate, and to extend opportunities to other aspiring athletes, especially black women. One was Jackie Joyner-Kersey, holder of six Olympic medals, who described Wilma as a mentor who “was always in my corner.”

After losing her battle with brain cancer, Wilma Rudolph died on November 12, 1994, but her legacy lives on through the door she first opened for young athletes and her commitment to God’s purpose for her life.



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