

Wilma Rudolph, 1940-1994: 'The Fastest Woman in the World'



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President John Kennedy at the White House with Wilma Rudolph in 1961, the year after she won three gold medals at the Olympic Games in Rome

STEVE EMBER: I'm Steve Ember.

BARBARA KLEIN: And I'm Barbara Klein with PEOPLE IN AMERICA in VOA Special English. Today we tell about Wilma Rudolph, the first American woman to win three gold medals in one Olympics.

(MUSIC)

STEVE EMBER: They called her "the Black Pearl," "the Black Gazelle" and "the fastest woman in the world." In nineteen sixty, Wilma Rudolph became the first American woman to win three gold medals in one Olympics. She was an extraordinary American athlete. She also did a lot to help young athletes succeed.

Wilma Rudolph was born in nineteen forty, in Saint Bethlehem, Tennessee. She was born too early and only weighed two kilograms. She had many illnesses when she was very young, including pneumonia and scarlet fever. She also had

polio, which damaged her left leg. When she was six years old, she began to wear metal leg braces because she could not use that leg.

BARBARA KLEIN: Wilma Rudolph was born into a very large, poor, African-American family. She was the twentieth of twenty-two children. Since she was sick most of the time, her brothers and sisters all helped to take care of her. They took turns rubbing her crippled leg every night. They also made sure she did not try to take off her leg braces. Every week, Wilma's mother drove her to a special doctor eighty kilometers away. Here, she got physical treatments to help heal her leg.

She later said: "My doctors told me I would never walk again. My mother told me I would. I believed my mother."



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Wilma Rudolph poses with Dorothy Hyman of Great Britain, left, and J. Heine of West Germany after the 200-meter race at the Rome Olympics

STEVE EMBER: Soon, her family's attention and care showed results. By the time she was nine years old, she no longer needed her leg braces. Wilma was very happy, because she could now run and play like other children. When she was eleven years old, her brothers set up a basketball hoop in the backyard. After that, she played basketball every day.

As a teenager, Wilma joined the girl's basketball team at Burt High School. C.C. Gray was the coach who supervised the team. He gave her the nickname "Skeeter." She did very well in high school basketball. She once scored forty-nine points in one game, which broke the Tennessee state record.

Many people noted that Wilma was a very good basketball player and a very good athlete. One of these people was Ed Temple, who coached the track team of runners at Tennessee State University. Ed Temple asked C.C. Gray to organize a girl's track team at the high school. He thought Wilma Rudolph would make a very good runner. She did very well on the new track team.

(MUSIC)

BARBARA KLEIN: Wilma Rudolph went to her first Olympic Games when she was sixteen years old and still in high school. She competed in the nineteen fifty-six games in Melbourne, Australia. She was the youngest member of the United States team. She won a bronze medal, or third place, in the sprint relay event.

In nineteen fifty-seven, Wilma Rudolph entered Tennessee State University, where she joined the track team. The coach, Ed Temple, worked very hard for the girls on the team. He drove them to track competitions and made improvements to the running track with his own money. However, he was not an easy coach. For example, he would make the members of the team run one extra time around the track for every minute they were late to practice.

Wilma Rudolph trained hard while in college. She did very well at her track competitions against teams from other colleges. In nineteen sixty, she set the world record for the fastest time in the two thousand meter event. She said: "I ran and ran and ran every day, and I acquired this sense of determination, this sense of spirit that I would never, never give up, no matter what else happened."

STEVE EMBER: That same year, Wilma Rudolph went to the Olympics again, this time in Rome, Italy. She won two gold medals -- first place -- in the one hundred meter and the two hundred meter races. She set a new Olympic record of twenty-three point two seconds for the two hundred meter dash.

Her team also won the gold medal in the four hundred meter sprint relay event, setting a world record of forty-four point five seconds. These three gold medals made her one of the most popular athletes at the Rome games. These victories made people call her the "world's fastest woman."

(SOUND: 1960 ROME OLYMPICS)

(MUSIC)

BARBARA KLEIN: Wilma Rudolph received a lot of attention from the press and the public, but she did not forget her teammates. She said that her favorite event was the relay, because she could share the victory with her teammates Martha Hudson, Lucinda Williams and Barbara Jones. All four women were from Tennessee State University.

The Associated Press named Rudolph the U.S. Female Athlete of the year. She also appeared on television many times. Sports fans in the United States and all over the world loved and respected her. She said: "The feeling of accomplishment welled up inside of me, three Olympic gold medals. I knew that was something nobody could ever take away from me, ever."

(MUSIC)

STEVE EMBER: Wilma Rudolph was a fine example for many people inside and outside the world of sports. She supported the civil rights movement -- the struggle for equality between white and black people. When she came home from

the Olympics, she told the governor of Tennessee that she would not attend a celebration where white and black people were separated. As a result, her homecoming parade and dinner were the first events in her hometown of Clarksville that white people and black people were able to attend together.

After she retired from sports, Wilma Rudolph completed her education at Tennessee State University. She got her bachelor's degree in elementary education and became a teacher. She returned to coach the track team at Burt High School. She also worked as a commentator for women's track competitions on national television. In nineteen sixty-three she married her high school boyfriend Robert Eldridge. They had four children, but later ended their marriage.

Wilma Rudolph won many important athletic awards. She was voted into the Black Athlete's Hall of Fame and the United

States Olympic Hall of Fame. She was also voted into the National Track and Field Hall of Fame. In nineteen seventy-seven, she wrote a book about her life called "Wilma." She wrote about her childhood problems and her athletic successes. NBC later made the book into a movie for television.

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BARBARA KLEIN: Rudolph said her greatest success was creating the Wilma Rudolph Foundation in nineteen eighty-one. This organization helped children in local communities to become athletes. She always wanted to help young athletes recognize how much they could succeed in their lives.

She said: "The triumph can't be had without the struggle. And I know what struggle is. I have spent a lifetime trying to share what it has meant to be a woman first in the world of sports so that other young women have a chance to reach their dreams."

Rudolph also influenced many athletes. One of them was another African American runner, Florence Griffith Joyner. In nineteen eighty-eight, Griffith Joyner became the second American woman to win three gold medals in one Olympics. She went on to win a total of six Olympic medals.

Wilma Rudolph was very happy to see other African-American female athletes succeed. She said: "I thought I'd never get to see that. Florence Griffith Joyner – every time she ran, I ran."

(MUSIC)

STEVE EMBER: Wilma Rudolph died of brain cancer in nineteen ninety-four in Nashville, Tennessee. She was fifty-four years old. She influenced athletes, African Americans and women around the world. She was an important example of how anyone can overcome barriers and make their dreams come true. Her nineteen sixty Olympics teammate, Bill Mulliken, said: "She was beautiful; she was nice, and she was the best."

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BARBARA KLEIN: This program was written by Erin Braswell and produced by Katy Weaver. I'm Barbara Klein.

STEVE EMBER: And I'm Steve Ember. You can learn more about famous Americans at our Web site, voaspecialenglish.com. Join us again next week for PEOPLE IN AMERICA in VOA Special English.