

Wilma Rudolph: The Tornado, Fastest Woman on Earth

Wilma Rudolph was born in post-depression times in a small farming town in Tennessee on June 23, 1940. She was the 20th of 22 children, in a blended family that included siblings from her father's first marriage. Wilma was born pre-mature weighing only 4.5 pounds, and was unhealthy from her early start. She caught infantile paralysis which developed from the polio virus, leaving her left leg and foot useless and twisted. Rudolph also survived scarlet fever, whooping cough, chicken pox, measles, and double pneumonia.

Her father was a porter for the railroad and did work as a handy man. Her mother cleaned houses, did laundry, and cooked for wealthy white families. Wilma's hard-working and devoted parents (Ed and Blanche) were determined to help her walk, and drove from their home in Clarksville, Tennessee to Nashville, making regular trips for treatments to straighten her twisted leg. She wore leg braces and got around in a wheelchair, also working hard to walk a little bit by using two canes. The doctors taught her parents a method of massage that they, in turn, taught to Wilma's older brothers and sisters. Everyone took turns and massaged her legs daily. Five years later Wilma surprised everyone when she removed her braces and walked across the room.

Wilma worked hard at improving her walk, and eventually was strong enough to run; and run she did! She ran foot races up and down her street with every kid she could find and, beat every one of them. Wilma also loved to play basketball in her backyard with her brothers and sisters, and was outside running and playing as often as she could.

Wilma wanted to follow in her sister Yolanda's footsteps and play on the high school basketball team. She worked with the coach for ten minutes every morning, but was cut from the team in her freshman year. Later, when the coach wanted her older sister to play at a game in Clarksville, Mississippi, their father took a stand and said that Yolanda couldn't play unless the coach allowed Wilma to play too. And so began Wilma's athletic career. Although Coach Clinton Gray didn't put her in a single game for three years, she finally got to play as a starting guard and "showed her stuff". Wilma continued playing with the team, going on to set a state record by scoring 803 points in 25 games, and took her team on to earn the title of state champs.

Wilma Rudolph grew up in the time of segregation. She went to Burt High School -- a poor, black school where supplies were sparse; there was no funding for a track team; and, even less to sponsor an athletic summer camp. After all those years of racing every kid on her street, Wilma's gift for sprinting was discovered the same year her basketball skills came out. The women's track coach at Tennessee State University (Ed Temple) had noticed Wilma at her debut basketball game, and invited her to Tennessee State for a summer sports camp. She continued to train with Coach Temple and the women's track team during every summer break throughout high school. Wilma competed on her high school track team for four seasons and never lost a race. According to many sources, years later Wilma told the *Chicago Tribune* that "when she was 12 years old she was challenging every boy in the neighborhood at "running, jumping, everything".

Wilma Rudolph had never even heard of the Olympics until, at age 16, she was invited to compete for the United States in Melbourne, Australia. She brought home a bronze medal.

In 1957, when she was 17, Wilma entered Tennessee State University and focused on running with the track team. Rudolph's intense training regimen became too much for her, and she fell ill. She could not compete for the university that year, but recovered in time to compete in the 1958 season. Unfortunately, Wilma pulled a muscle at a meet between the U.S. and Russia which put her out for the rest of that season too.

Wilma's long-time coach (Ed Temple) oversaw her recovery from that injury, and personally took charge of her training. A determined Wilma Rudolph worked hard under Temple's guidance, and was able to compete in the 1960 Olympics in Rome, Italy, where she earned the nickname "La Gazelle Negra" (The Black Gazelle). According to Wikipedia, Rudolph was also called "La Perle Noire" by the French (The Black Pearl), and was also named "The Tornado" or Fastest Woman on Earth.

Wilma Rudolph not only won her events at the Olympics, but tied the world record in the 100 meter dash; set a new Olympic record for the 200 meter dash; and, brought her relay team from the rear to win the gold medal. She was the first American woman to win three medals in one Olympic competition.

According to espn.go.com, when she returned from Rome, Tennessee Gov. Buford Ellington, who was elected as "an old-fashioned segregationist," planned to head her welcome home celebration. Rudolph said she would not attend a segregated event. Her parade and banquet were the first integrated events in her hometown of Clarksville, Tennessee.

Rudolph said "her greatest accomplishment was creating the Wilma Rudolph Foundation, a not-for-profit, community-based amateur sports program."

Some of my sources:

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tags: African American History, women in history, women athletes, track, 1960 Olympics, Wilma Rudolph