

The Wilma Rudolph Story

“She was speed and motion incarnate!”

That’s how Jesse Owens, American track and field athlete and four-time Olympic gold medalist, described Wilma Rudolph.



Rudolph (1940 – 1994) was a track and field sprinter who competed in the 100 and 200 meters dash. She was considered the fastest woman in the world in the 1960s and competed in two Olympic Games in 1956 and 1960.

In the 1960 Summer Olympics in Rome, Rudolph became the first American woman to win three gold medals in track and field during a single Olympic Games. She elevated women’s track to a major presence in the United States. As a

member of the black community, she is also regarded as a civil rights and women’s rights pioneer.

But her struggles in life began early. She was born prematurely, the 20th of 22 children. As a young child, she contracted double pneumonia and scarlet fever. At age 4, she developed polio, and her left leg began to atrophy.

The doctors thought she would never walk again, but her family didn’t give up. They took turns massaging her legs for hours. Finally, with the aid of a brace and orthopedic shoe, she slowly started to walk. She had been bedridden and out of school for two years.

When she was 11, the leg brace came off, and the orthopedic shoe, which she hated, was thrown away. Wilma Rudolph was free at last.

Rudolph had an absolute passion for running. She would occasionally skip school and sneak into a local stadium. The sheer joy of running was so great that she would run all day long. Within a year, she was challenging the boys in the neighborhood and beating most of them.

In 1953, after her treatments were over, Rudolph chose to follow in her sister’s footsteps and began playing basketball. While playing for her high school team, she was spotted by Tennessee State track and field coach Ed Temple. At age 15, just four years after she threw away the braces, she was invited by Temple to train with the school’s Tigerbelles, the celebrated Tennessee State University women’s track team.

(more)

At age 16, she qualified for the 1956 Olympic team but won only a bronze medal. She then enrolled at Tennessee State on a track scholarship and trained under Temple, who coached the 1960 Olympic team. On that team, Rudolph became a superstar.

On the day before her first heat in the 100, she severely sprained her ankle but still won gold medals in the 100-meter and the 200-meter. She then anchored the 400-meter relay en route to her third gold medal.

What Wilma Rudolph accomplished was incredible. But her success was not in spite of her problems, but because of them. She treasured the good health that others took for granted. Her joy filled her with an exuberance that intensified her training and enabled her to outshine the athletes of her day.



What about you? Is there something hindering you, something standing in the way of fulfilling your dream?

Follow your star with discipline and determination, and chances are good you will reach new heights.

Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one receives the prize? So run that you may obtain it. Every athlete exercises self-control in all things (1 Corinthians 9:24-25 ESV).

– Beecher Hunter