



The Fastest Woman in the World

SOURCE: Highlights for Children, Inc.

By Pat Parker

The Fastest Woman

Wilma Rudolph competes in the 200-meter sprint at the 1960 Olympics.



In 1960, Wilma Rudolph sprinted into history.

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Wilma Rudolph crouched at the starting line, every muscle in her lean, 5-foot-11-inch body poised for the race. The starter gave the signal, and Wilma took off. Did this young woman from Tennessee have the strength and determination to win the Olympic gold medal?

Everything in Wilma's life had prepared her for this moment. But Wilma wasn't an ordinary athlete. "My life wasn't like the average person who grew up and decided to enter the world of sports," she said.

Sick All the Time

Wilma Rudolph was born on June 23, 1940. She weighed four and a half pounds. No one expected her to survive. "I was sick all of the time when I was growing up," Wilma wrote in her autobiography, *Wilma*.

Wilma was the 20th of 22 children. In America in the 1940s, segregation kept black and white people from being treated the same. Because the Rudolphs were African American, only one doctor in their town would care for

Wilma. Her mother helped by using home remedies to nurse Wilma through measles, mumps, chicken pox, scarlet fever, appendicitis, and double pneumonia. "I think I started acquiring a competitive spirit right then and there, a spirit that would make me successful in sports later on. . . . I was going to beat these illnesses no matter what."

Wilma fought her hardest childhood battle against polio, a disease that crippled her left leg. Mrs. Rudolph found a black



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medical college in Nashville, 50 miles away. Twice a week, for several years, Wilma and her mother took the bus to Nashville. At home, Wilma and her family massaged and exercised her weak leg to strengthen it.

After several months, the hospital fitted Wilma with a brace. "The brace went on . . . and I lived with that thing for the next half-dozen years . . . When I was six, I started treatments . . . that lasted until I was ten years old."

Sending Back the Brace

"I was nine and a half years old when I first took off the brace. . . . I'll never forget it. I went to church, and I walked in without the brace. . . . I'd say it was one of the most important moments of my life," Wilma wrote.

Although she used the brace on and off for three more years, she practiced until she could finally walk without it. When Wilma was 12, her mother wrapped up the

brace and sent it back to the hospital.

That summer, Wilma went to a local playground and saw kids playing basketball. She fell in love with the game and decided she would play no matter what.

Off and Running

In the fall, Wilma entered seventh grade and joined the basketball team. For the next three years, she practiced hard. Finally, in tenth grade, Wilma got the chance to be part of the starting team. She began to set state records for scoring.

Ed Temple, the women's track coach at Tennessee State University, saw Wilma play. He invited her to come to Tennessee State during the summers so he could coach her in track. Wilma learned fast. In 1956, at the age of 16, she ran her first Olympic race at the games in Australia and won a bronze medal in the 4x100-meter relay.

Not About to Lose

Wilma's time to shine came four years later. At the 1960 Olympics, she won gold medals in the 100-meter dash and the 200-meter dash. She had one event left as the last leg of a

With a burst of speed, Wilma Rudolph races ahead to help her team win gold at the 1960 Olympics.



Wilma and her parents ride in a parade celebrating her Olympic victories.

four-woman relay team, all from Tennessee State. As the third woman on the team ran toward her, Wilma reached for the baton and nearly dropped it. Her team was suddenly in third place. Wilma was not about to lose. With a final burst of speed, Wilma raced ahead of the competition, becoming the first American woman to win three gold medals at one Olympics.

The little girl who couldn't walk had become the fastest woman in the world. 🏃‍♀️

Helping Others

After the Olympics, Wilma decided that she wanted to help children overcome their difficulties by participating in sports. Through her teaching and the foundations she established, she helped countless children overcome all kinds of obstacles, just as she had.

