

Wilma Rudolph – Distinguished Americans series

Scott #3422 (sheet stamp), #3436 (booklet stamp) – Stamp artist is Mark Summers

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Wilma Glodean Rudolph (June 23, 1940 – November 12, 1994) was an Olympic champion. Rudolph was considered the fastest woman in the world in the 1960s and competed in two Olympic Games, in 1956 and in 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. A track and field champion, 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. Along with other 1960 Olympic athletes such as Cassius Clay, who later became Muhammad Ali, Rudolph became an international star due to the first international television coverage of the Olympics that year.

The powerful sprinter emerged from the 1960 Rome Olympics as "The Tornado, the fastest woman on earth". The Italians nicknamed her La Gazzella Nera ("The Black Gazelle"); to the French she was La Perle Noire ("The Black Pearl").

Wilma Glodean Rudolph was born prematurely at 4.5 pounds (2.0 kg), the 20th of twenty two siblings from two marriages; her father Ed was a railway porter and her mother Blanche a maid. Rudolph contracted infantile paralysis (caused by the polio virus) at age four. She recovered, but wore a brace on her left leg and foot (which had become twisted as a result) until she was nine. She was required to wear an orthopedic shoe for support of her foot for another two years. Her family traveled regularly from Clarksville, Tennessee, to Meharry Hospital (now Nashville General Hospital at Meharry) in Nashville, Tennessee, for treatments for her twisted leg. In addition, by the time she was twelve years old she had also survived bouts of polio and scarlet fever.

In 1953, twelve-year-old Rudolph finally achieved her dream of shedding her handicap and becoming like other children. Her older sister was on a basketball team, and Wilma wanted to follow her sister's footsteps. While in high school, Rudolph was on the basketball team when she was spotted by Tennessee State track and field coach Ed Temple. Being discovered by Temple was a major break for a young athlete. The day he saw the tenth grader for the first time, he knew he had found a natural

athlete. Rudolph had already gained some track experience on Burt High School's track team two years before, mostly as a way to keep busy between basketball seasons.

While attending Burt High School, Rudolph became a basketball star setting state records for scoring and leading her team to the state championship. She also joined Temple's summer program at Tennessee State and trained regularly and raced with his Tigerbelles for two years. By the time she was sixteen, she earned a berth on the U.S. Olympic track and field team and came home from the 1956 Melbourne Games with an Olympic bronze medal in the 4×100 m relay to show her high school classmates.

In 1959, Rudolph won a gold medal in the 4×100 m relay at Pan American Games (with Isabelle Daniels, Barbara Jones, and Lucinda Williams) and an individual silver in the 100 m. The same year she won the AAU 100 m title and defended it for four consecutive years. During her career, she also won three AAU indoor titles.

At the 1960 Summer Olympics in Rome she won three Olympic titles: in the 100 m, 200 m and 4×100 m relay. As the temperature climbed toward 110 °F (43 °C), 80,000 spectators jammed the Stadio Olimpico. Rudolph ran the 100-meter dash in an impressive 11 seconds flat. However the time was not credited as a world record, because it was wind-aided. She also won the 200-meter dash in 23.2 seconds, a new Olympic record. After these wins, she was being hailed throughout the world as "the fastest woman in history". Finally, on September 11, 1960, she combined with Tennessee State teammates Martha Hudson, Lucinda Williams and Barbara Jones to win the 400-meter relay in 44.5 seconds, setting a world record. Rudolph had a special, personal reason to hope for victory—to pay tribute to Jesse Owens, the celebrated American athlete who had been her inspiration, also the star of the 1936 Summer Olympics, held in Berlin, Germany.

Following post-games European tour by the American team Rudolph returned home to Clarksville. At her wishes, her homecoming parade and banquet were the first fully integrated municipal events in the city's history. Rudolph retired from track competition in 1962 at age 22 after winning two races at a U.S.–Soviet meet. She got a job teaching Grade two in her childhood school. Conflict forced her to leave the position. She moved to Indianapolis to head a community center. Then she moved to St. Louis Missouri, then Detroit, Michigan, and then returned to Tennessee for a time in the late 60s before moving again to California. She then lived in Chicago during the Mayor Richard J. Daley years.

In July 1994, shortly after her mother's death, Rudolph was diagnosed with a brain tumor. On November 12, 1994, at age 54, she died of cancer in her home in Nashville. Wilma also had throat cancer. She was interred at Edgefield Missionary Baptist Church in Clarksville, Tennessee. At the time of her death, she had four children, eight grandchildren, and many nieces and nephews. Thousands of mourners filled Tennessee State University's Kean Hall on November 17, 1994, for the memorial service in her honor. Others attended the funeral at Clarksville's First Baptist Church. Across Tennessee, the state flag flew at half-mast.

Nine months after Rudolph's death, Tennessee State University, on August 11, 1995, dedicated its new six-story dormitory the "Wilma G. Rudolph Residence Center". A black marble marker was placed on her grave in Clarksville's Foster Memorial Garden Cemetery by the Wilma Rudolph Memorial Commission on November 21, 1995. In 1997, Governor Don Sundquist proclaimed that June 23 be known as "Wilma Rudolph Day" in Tennessee..

Source:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wilma_Rudolph

<http://www.biography.com/people/wilma-rudolph-9466552#early-life>

http://www.tnhistoryforkids.org/people/wilma_rudolph

<http://www.olympic.org/wilma-rudolph>