

Excerpt from: Track & Field Self-Guided Workouts: Motivation and Activities

Wilma Rudolph: The Black Gazelle

Wilma Rudolph's race in life started very slowly as the 20th of 22 children. She was born prematurely and weighed only 4.5 pounds at birth. Because of racial segregation, Wilma and her mother were not permitted to be cared for at the local hospital because it was for whites only. The only black doctor was 50 miles away, which was a hardship on the Rudolph family's budget. Through the next several years, Wilma faced one hardship after another in the form of measles, mumps, scarlet fever, chicken pox, and double pneumonia.

When Wilma was 6 years old, it was discovered that her left leg and foot were becoming weak and deformed with polio, a crippling disease that had no cure. The doctor told Wilma that she would never walk again. Wilma and her mother were determined not to give up. With the help of the black medical college of Fisk University in Nashville, Wilma went through vigorous physical therapy using crutches, braces, and corrective shoes. Finally, by the age of 12, she could walk normally and decided to become an athlete.

In high school Wilma became a basketball star, setting state records for scoring and leading her team to the state championship. By the time she was 16, 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 4x100 meter relay.

At the 1960 Summer Olympics in Rome, 80,000 spectators filled the Olympic Stadium in temperatures over 100 degrees. In the 100 meters, she tied the world record of 11.3 in the semifinals and then won the final in 11.0. However, because of a 2.75-meter per second wind, above the acceptable limit of two meters per second, she didn't receive credit for a world record. In the 200 meters, she broke the Olympic record in the opening heat in 23.2 and won the final in 24.0. In the 4x100-meter relay, Wilma, despite a poor baton pass, overtook Germany's anchor leg and the Americans, all women from Tennessee State, took the gold in 44.5 after setting a world record of 44.4 in the semifinals.

Wilma did more than promote her country. In her soft-spoken, gracious manner, she paved the way for future African American athletes, both men and women.

Questions for Thought:

1. Wilma Rudolph could not walk normally until she was 12, yet four years later, she was on the Olympic team. Do you ever think something is impossible?
2. Wilma was gracious and humble as an athlete. On a scale of 1-10 (10 high), how humble are you?
3. How does the Wilma Rudolph story inspire you?

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