

Leaders of Afro-American Nashville

Wilma Rudolph and the TSU Tigerbelles



The Tigerbelles Women's Track Club at Tennessee State University became the state's most internationally accomplished athletic team. The sprinters won some 23 Olympic medals, more than any other sports team in Tennessee history. Mae Faggs and Barbara Jones became the first Olympic medal winning Tigerbelles in 1952. The Tigerbelles won another medal in 1956. Eventually, the Gold Medal winners included Edith McGuire, Madeline Manning, Barbara Jones, Martha Hudson, Lucinda Williams, Chandra Chesseborough (2), Wilma Rudolph (3) and Wyomia Tyus (3). Tyus became the first athlete to win Gold Medals in the sprints in two consecutive Olympiads (1964 and 1968), but the first star of the Tigerbelles was Wilma Goldean Rudolph.

Wilma G. Rudolph was born June 23, 1940, in Clarksville. She was the 20th of 22 children. Her father, E. D. Rudolph, already had fourteen children when he married Wilma's mother, Blanche. Wilma Rudolph suffered chicken pox, measles, scarlet fever, whooping cough, and polio. She wore leg braces from age six until ten years old.

In early 1955, when serving as a referee for a basketball game in Clarksville, the coach of the Tennessee A & I State College women's track team, Edward S. Temple, invited the long, skinny-legged teenage basketball player, 14-year-old Wilma, to attend his summer camp. In 1956 Rudolph and five other Tigerbelles qualified for the 1956 Olympics, returning to Nashville with many medals and plaques. In 1959 Rudolph accompanied the team to the Pan American Games where they also won several medals. At the 1960 Olympic Games in Rome, Italy, Rudolph won three gold medals. Coach Temple said: "...at the 1960 Olympics ... I was so happy [for Wilma] I was bursting all the buttons off my shirt."

Wilma G. Rudolph won the James E. Sullivan Award in 1961, the year her father died. She was received by President John F. Kennedy. In 1962 Rudolph retired from track and field and completed goodwill tours abroad before returning to Clarksville. There she married Robert Eldridge, and they had two sons and two daughters: Yolanda, Djuana, Robert, and Xurry. After teaching second grade in a Clarksville elementary school, Rudolph left to take several jobs, later settling in Indianapolis for ten years. Although a star and America's first female athlete to be so honored, Wilma Rudolph's life was "no crystal stair." In her book, Wilma: The Story of Wilma Rudolph (1977), Rudolph said: "I was besieged with money problems; people were always expecting me to be a star, but I wasn't making the money to live like one. I felt exploited both as a woman and as a black person." On December 2, 1980, Tennessee State University named its indoor track for Wilma Rudolph.

In 1992 Wilma Rudolph's life journey pulled her back to Tennessee, where she became a vice-president for Nashville's Baptist Hospital. In July of 1994, shortly after her mother's death, Wilma Rudolph was diagnosed with brain and throat cancer. She did not want people to see her, but Rudolph would come out to Tennessee State University and walk arm-in-arm around the Tigerbelle's track with retired Coach Temple. On November 12, 1994, Wilma G. Rudolph quietly passed away. Thousands of persons filled TSU'S Kean Hall on November 17 when Rudolph's body was received for memorial services. The funeral followed at Clarksville's First Baptist Church, and the State of Tennessee flew flags at half-mast.

Wilma G. Rudolph's life was short, painful, but triumphant. She was more than an athlete; Wilma Rudolph was the epitome of the triumphant human

being. She was a leader, a humanitarian, and an extraordinary person in the history of Tennessee. She won the National Woman's Hall of Fame award (1994) and was awarded two honorary degrees. A section of Highway 79 in Clarksville was renamed the Wilma Rudolph Boulevard (1994). On July 21, 1995, Clarksville groups held a Wilma Rudolph Breakfast. On August 11, 1995, TSU dedicated its new six-story dormitory the Wilma G. Rudolph Residence Center. On November 21, 1995, the Wilma Rudolph Memorial Commission placed a black marble marker at her grave in Clarksville's Foster Memorial Garden Cemetery. On October 13, 1995, TSU's annual Edward S. Temple Seminars in

Society and Sports named its annual luncheon the Wilma Rudolph Memorial Luncheon. Lastly, in April of 1996, a life-sized bronze statue of Rudolph was completed for mounting in Clarksville, Tennessee.

- Bobby L. Lovett