**Wilma Glodean Rudolph**  
**June 23, 1940 – November 12, 1994**

**EDUCATION:** At first, Wilma was tutored at home by her family because she was crippled. She began school at the age of seven. In 1947, the schools of the Southern states were segregated—black students and white students had to attend separate schools. Even though blacks had to pay the same taxes as whites, the schools for black students were usually poorly funded, so they were less likely to have adequate books, teachers, classrooms, or equipment. In junior high, Wilma followed her older sister Yolanda’s example and joined the basketball team. The coach, Clinton Gray, didn’t put her in a single game for three years. Finally, in her sophomore year, she became the starting guard. During the state basketball tournament, she was spotted by Ed Temple, the coach for the famous Tigerbells, the women’s track team at Tennessee State University. Because Burt High School didn’t have the funding for a track team, coach Temple invited Wilma to Tennessee State for a summer sports camp. After graduating from high school, Wilma received a full scholarship to Tennessee State. Because of all the celebrity she received from her track career, she took a year off from her studies to make appearances and compete in international track events. She returned and received a Bachelor’s degree in education, graduating in 1963.

**FAMILY BACKGROUND:** Wilma Rudolph was born into a large family—she was the 20th of 22 children! Her parents, Ed and Blanche Rudolph, were honest, hardworking people, but were very poor. In 1940, millions of Americans were poor—out of work and homeless because of the Great Depression. The Rudolphs managed to make ends meet by doing things like making the girls’ dresses out of flour sacks. Wilma was born prematurely and weighed only 4.5 pounds. Again, because of racial segregation, she and her mother were not permitted to be cared for at the local hospital. It was for whites only. There was only one black doctor in Clarksville, and the Rudolph’s budget was tight, so Wilma’s mother spent the next several years nursing Wilma through one illness after another: measles, mumps, scarlet fever, chicken pox, and double pneumonia. But, she had to be taken to the doctor when it was discovered that her left leg and foot were becoming weak and deformed. She was told she had polio, a crippling disease that had no cure. The doctor told Mrs. Rudolph that Wilma would never walk. But Mrs. Rudolph would not give up on Wilma. She found out that she could be treated at Meharry Hospital, the black medical college of Fisk University in Nashville. Even though it was 50 miles away, Wilma’s mother took her there twice a week for two years, until she was able to walk with the aid of a metal leg brace. Then the doctors taught Mrs. Rudolph how to do the physical therapy exercises at home. All of her brother and sisters helped too, and they did everything to encourage her to be strong and work hard at getting well. Finally, by age 12, she could walk normally, without the crutches, brace, or corrective shoes. It was then that she decided to become an athlete. In 1963, Wilma married her high school sweetheart, Robert Eldridge, with whom she had four children: Yolanda (1958), Djuanna (1964), Robert Jr. (1965), and Xurry (1971).

**DESCRIPTION OF ACCOMPLISHMENTS:** Wilma Rudolph’s life is a story of achieving against the odds. Her first accomplishments were to stay alive and get well! In high school, she became a basketball star first, who set state records for scoring and led her team to a state championship. The she became a
track star, going to her first Olympic Games in 1956 at the age of 16. She won a bronze medal in the 4x4 relay. On September 7, 1960, in Rome, Wilma became the first American woman to win 3 gold medals in the Olympics. She won the 100-meter dash, the 200-meter dash, and ran on the 400-meter relay team. This achievement led her to become one of the most celebrated female athletes of all time. In addition, her celebrity caused gender barriers to be broken in previously all-male track and field events.

AWARDS:
United Press Athlete of the Year 1960
Associated Press Woman Athlete of the Year 1960
James E. Sullivan Award for Good Sportsmanship 1961
The Babe Zaharias Award 1962
European Sportswriters’ Sportsman of the Year*
Christopher Columbus Award for Most Outstanding International Sports Personality 1960*
The Penn Relays 1961*
New York Athletic Club Track Meet*
The Millrose Games*
Black Sports Hall of Fame 1980
U.S. Olympic Hall of Fame 1983
Vitalis Cup for Sports Excellence 1983
Women’s Sports Foundation Award 1984
*indicates first woman to receive the award/invitation

There were other honors as well. In 1963 she was selected to represent the U.S. State Department as a Goodwill Ambassador at the Game of Friendship in Dakar, Senegal. Later that year she was invited by Dr. Billy Graham to join the Baptist Christian Athletes in Japan.

There was one “first” accomplishment that was more special than any of the others, however. For Wilma, the fact that she insisted that her homecoming parade in Clarksville, Tennessee be open to everyone and not a segregated event as was the usual custom. Her victory parade was the first racially integrated event ever held in the town. And that night, the banquet the townspeople held in her honor, was the first time in Clarksville’s history that blacks and whites had ever gathered together for the same event. She went on to participate in protests in the city until the segregation laws were struck down.

After retiring from track competition, Wilma returned to Clarksville to live. She taught at her old school, Cobb Elementary, and was the track coach at her alma mater, Burt High School. She replaced her old coach, Clinton Gray, who, tragically, had been killed in an auto accident. But small town life proved to be too conservative after all her worldly experiences. She moved on to coaching positions, first in Maine, and then, Indiana. She was invited to be the guest speaker at dozens of schools and universities. She also went into broadcasting and became a sports commentator on national television and the co-host of a network radio show. In 1967 Vice-President Hubert Humphrey invited Wilma to participate in “Operation Champ,” an athletic outreach program for underprivileged youth in the ghettos of 16 major cities. She started her own non-profit organization, The Wilma Rudolph Foundation, to continue this kind of work. The foundation provided free coaching in a variety of sports, and academic assistance and support as well. In 1977 she wrote her autobiography, simply titled, “Wilma.” It was adapted as a
television movie; Wilma work on it as a consultant. In 1997, Governor Don Sundquist proclaimed June 23 as Wilma Rudolph Day in Tennessee.

Wilma died in her home. She had been in and out of hospitals for several month after brain cancer was diagnosed. Leroy Walker, president of the U.S. Olympic Committee, said, “All of us recognize that this is obviously a tremendous loss. Wilma was still very much involved with a number of Olympic programs. It’s a tragic loss. She was struck with an illness that, unfortunately, we can’t do very much about.”

READING:
Wilma unlimited: how Wilma Rudolph became the world’s fastest woman by Kathleen Krull; illustrated by David Diaz. San Diego: Harcourt Brace, c1996.