



Image from: [Wilma Rudolph \(1940–1994\) in African American Almanac](#)

Summary Article: **Rudolph, Wilma (1940–1994)**

from *Freedom Facts and Firsts: 400 Years of the African American Civil Rights Experience*

The first American woman to win three gold medals in an Olympiad, Wilma Glodean Rudolph was born on June 23, 1940, in Clarksville, Tennessee. The road to Olympic stardom was not easy. Rudolph, who was diagnosed with polio at the age of four, was never expected to walk, much less run. She wore a leg brace and corrective shoe until her adolescent years. Her family took turns massaging her crippled leg every day. Once a week her mother, Blanche, drove 90 miles round-trip to Hubbard Hospital in Nashville, where the young Rudolph received therapy. Because of her family's perseverance and her determination, Rudolph was able to discard her leg brace and corrective shoes by age 12. In four short years, she became a basketball star at the all-black Burt High School. In 1955 she captured the attention of Edward S. Temple, the coach of **Tennessee A&I State University** (now Tennessee State University) women's track team, who invited Rudolph to attend his summer camp. In 1956 she and five other "Tigerbelles" qualified for the 1956 Olympics held in Melbourne, Australia.

Rudolph was the youngest member of the U.S. team; she returned to Nashville with a bronze medal for her efforts in the sprint relay event. Three years later, as a student at Tennessee A&I, she and the Tigerbelles attended the Pan American Games in Chicago, where she brought home a silver medal. The following year, at the 1960 Olympic Summer Games in Rome, Italy, Rudolph won three gold medals and became the first American women to do so in a single Olympiad. She won gold in the 100-meter, the 200-meter, where she set a world record, and the 400-meter relays. It was in the 400-meter relay that she set another world record with fellow Tennessee State teammates Martha Hudson, Lucinda Williams, and Barbara Jones. One of the most popular athletes from the games, the "Tennessee Tornado" emerged as the world's fastest woman. The Italians nicknamed her "La Gazzella Nera" (the Black Gazelle); to the French she was "La Perle Noire" (The Black Pearl).

*Rudolph refused to attend a racially segregated event. Consequently, her parade and banquet were the first integrated events in her hometown of Clarksville.*

Rudolph paid tribute to **Jesse Owens**, who had been her inspiration and star of the 1936 Summer Olympics held in Berlin, Germany. Governor Buford Ellington, who was elected as an "old-fashion segregationist," planned to head Rudolph's welcome home celebration when she returned home. However, in keeping with the timbre of the times and the civil rights efforts in the city of Nashville, the state of Tennessee, and across the South, Rudolph refused to attend a racially segregated event. Consequently, her parade and banquet were the first integrated events in her hometown of Clarksville. Rudolph was the 1960 United Press Athlete of the Year and the Associated Press Woman Athlete of the Year. The next year she won the James E. Sullivan Award as the top amateur athlete in the United States and visited with President **John F. Kennedy**. In 1962 Rudolph retired from track and field competition and completed goodwill tours abroad. That same year she was awarded the Babe Didrickson Zaharias Award. She was voted into the National Black Sports and Entertainment Hall of

Fame in 1973 and the National Track and Field Hall of Fame in 1974. On December 2, 1980, Tennessee State University named its indoor track after Wilma Rudolph. She was inducted into the U.S. Olympic Hall of Fame in 1983 and honored with the National Sports Award in 1993. The following year, she was inducted into the National Women's Hall of Fame. The recipient of numerous other awards and one of the most celebrated female athletes ever, Wilma Rudolph made an impact on both race and gender in the world of sports. She passed away on November 12, 1994. In 1996, a life-size statue of Rudolph was erected in Clarksville, Tennessee.

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**APA**

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## APA

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## MLA

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