

Wilma Rudolph, Olympic Star

Wilma Rudolph was born in Tennessee in 1940. She was the twentieth of twenty-two children in a poor but loving African American family. Because she was born two months early, the doctor doubted she would live. She survived but was ill with a variety of sicknesses throughout her childhood. After recovering from scarlet fever and pneumonia, at age four she contracted polio, a virus that at the time killed thousands of people every year. The polio caused Wilma to lose the use of her left leg, and doctors doubted she would ever be able to walk again without the help of metal leg braces.

Wilma proved them wrong. She grew strong enough to discard the leg braces and kept on moving. She grew to be five feet, eleven inches tall, decided to pursue basketball, and became the team's star. In one game, she set a record of forty-nine points. Her coach gave her the nickname "Skeeter" because she buzzed around like a mosquito, constantly asking questions and begging to be put in the game.

When she was in the eighth grade, Wilma was asked to join the high school track team where she developed her running skills. She did not immediately impress people, however; at one track meet she lost every race. The next year, Ed Temple, the track coach at Tennessee State University, saw her run and thought she had talent. He invited her to his summer camp for track athletes, and the next fall, she attended daily practices at the college while still in high school.

After all this hard work, Wilma made the 1956 Olympic team at age sixteen. She did not place in the 200-meter dash event, but she earned a bronze medal as part of the 400-meter relay team.

The following year, Wilma had a baby and many people thought she would never participate in track again, yet she went on to attend Tennessee State University and joined the track team there. With intense training, she secured a place on the 1960 Olympic team. Along with three of her college teammates, she headed to Rome, Italy, for the competition.

At the 1960 Olympics, Wilma easily won the 100-meter and 200-meter dashes. Her team was trailing in the 400-meter relay when Wilma's turn came, but she pulled ahead of the leaders and ended up in first place. She became the first American woman to win three gold medals in track and field at one Olympics. This performance earned her a new nickname: "the fastest woman in the world."

At that time, Olympic stars made little money from endorsements the way they do now, so Wilma found a job teaching at her own former elementary school. She later worked in sports and eventually started an organization to train young athletes. "I tell them that the most important aspect is to be yourself and have confidence in yourself," she said. "I remind them that triumph can't be had without the struggle." Cheerful and modest, Wilma was surrounded by fans wherever she went.

Perhaps her early struggles gave Wilma her competitive spirit, or maybe being confined in childhood gave her the urge to keep moving. "I don't know why I run so fast," she once said, adding, "I just run." In fact, she ran her way into the history books and inspired generations of young athletes along the way.

Questions

1. What is the main idea of the article?
2. How is the article structured?
3. Wilma Rudolph said, "Triumph can't be had without the struggle." What does this mean?
4. What are some ways that Wilma Rudolph is an inspiration?

Vocabulary List

Each of the vocabulary words below are used in the reading passage. As you read the passage, pay attention to context clues that suggest the word's meaning.

1. discard
2. pursue
3. impress
4. endorsements
5. aspect

Context Clues

Using context clues from the sentences in the passage, underline the correct meaning of the word in boldface.

1) "She grew strong enough to **discard** the leg braces"

a. use or apply b. throw away; eliminate c. improve; make better d. substitute

2) "decided to **pursue** basketball"

a. read about b. withdraw from c. attempt or work towards d. announce; report on

3) "She did not immediately **impress** people"

a. thrill or affect strongly b. like or become fond of c. talk to; speak with d. educate

4) "Olympic stars made little money from **endorsements** the way they do now"

a. exhibition games b. gambling c. coaching d. public recommendations or commercials

5) "I tell them that the most important **aspect** is to be yourself"

a. attitude or feature b. myth; falsehood c. conversation d. player; competitor