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Wilma Rudolph, Star of the 1960 Olympics, Dies at 54

By **FRANK LITSKY** NOV. 13, 1994

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Wilma Rudolph, who grew from a sickly child unable to walk into a statuesque athlete of 20 who won three gold medals as a sprinter in the 1960 Olympics in Rome, died yesterday at her home in Brentwood, Tenn., near Nashville. She was 54.

Her sister, Charlene Rudolph, said Rudolph learned in July that she had a malignant brain tumor.

Rudolph was a handsome, regal woman, 6 feet tall, charming, graceful and gracious. Over seven days, she became the first woman to win three gold medals in track and field in one Olympics. She also became America's greatest female sports hero since Babe Didrikson Zaharias a generation earlier.

She competed in an era in which Olympic sports such as track and field were completely amateur, and for years later, as a frequent spokeswoman for Olympic-family organizations and causes, she preached the idealism of that bygone era.

"I love what the Olympics stand for," she said. "They'll always be a part of me."

As Barbara Heilman wrote in *Sports Illustrated*, "She can command a look of mingled graciousness and hauteur that suggests a duchess, but in a crowd that is one part Skeeter and 5,000 parts people, young men and babies will come to her in 30 seconds."

Skeeter was the nickname bestowed by her high school basketball coach, Clinton Gray, who considered her more mosquito than basketball player. "You're just like a skeeter," he said. "You're little, you're fast and you always get in my way." Her life story was so dramatic that in 1977 it became a two-hour prime-time television movie. The movie was written, produced and directed by her friend Bud Greenspan, the Olympic historian.

"She was the Jesse Owens of women's track and field, and like Jesse, she changed the sport for all time," he said. "She became the benchmark for little black girls to aspire."

Wilma Glodean Rudolph was born on June 23, 1940, in the St. Bethlehem section of Clarksville, Tenn., 45 miles north of Nashville, and grew up in Clarksville. She was the 20th of 22 children of Ed Rudolph, a railroad porter, from two marriages. Her mother, Blanche, was a domestic.

The child weighed four and a half pounds at birth. At age 4, she contracted double pneumonia and scarlet fever simultaneously and almost died. The illnesses left her left leg paralyzed, and once a week, on her mother's day off, the mother made a 90-mile round trip with her to Nashville for heat and water treatment on the leg.

At 6, she started to hop on one leg. At 8, she started to walk with a leg brace. Later, an orthopedic shoe replaced the brace. One day, when she was 11, her mother found her playing basketball in her bare feet. That was the end of the special shoe and the beginning of a fabled sports career.

"My father pushed me to become competitive," she wrote in a 1978 autobiography, "Wilma." "With so many children, when you did something with one, you always had another along. He felt that sports would help me overcome the problems."

At 13, she went out for the high school basketball team and twice made the all-state team. She would sometimes skip school to run on a track across the street. Her talent intrigued Ed Temple, the renowned coach at Tennessee State University in Nashville, and at his invitation she attended his summer track camps.

In 1956, a 16-year-old stringbean of 89 pounds, she ran in the Melbourne Olympics. To her dismay, she was eliminated in the 200-meter heats. She did win a bronze medal in the 400-meter relay.

Then she returned to high school. When she graduated, Temple gave her an athletic scholarship at Tennessee State. Bulked up to 130 pounds, she made the 1960

Olympic team. Temple was the women's coach.

The day before the 100 meters in the Rome Olympics, she stepped into a hole in the infield of the practice track and twisted an ankle. It became swollen and discolored. The next day, the ankle held up, and with her fluid running style she won her semifinal in 11.3 seconds, equaling the world record. She won the final easily in 11.0 seconds, but the following wind of 6.15 miles an hour (the allowable limit is 4.47) precluded recognition as a world record.

In the 200 meters, she set an Olympic record of 23.2 seconds in the heats and won the final easily in 24.0 seconds into a stiff wind. In the 400-meter relay, with college teammates running the first three legs, she helped set a world record of 44.4 seconds in a heat. In the final, after a bad baton pass to her, she turned a two-yard deficit into a three-yard victory in 44.5 seconds.

"After the playing of 'The Star-Spangled Banner,' " she wrote in her autobiography, "I came away from the victory stand and I was mobbed. People were jumping all over me, putting microphones into my face, pounding my back, and I couldn't believe it."

She returned to college and earned a degree in education in 1961. She was voted the 1961 Sullivan Award as America's outstanding amateur athlete, male or female.

But there was no money for amateurs then and no professional track, so she set out to make a living. She taught second grade and coached high school basketball and track in Tennessee, all for \$400 a month. Then she ran a community center in Indiana for \$600 a month.

She last raced in 1962. She quit, she said, because "I couldn't top what I did, so I'll be remembered for when I was at my best."

In time, she became a spokeswoman for a movie studio, a baking company and other businesses. At DePauw University in Indiana, she coached briefly and recruited minority-group students. She established the Wilma Rudolph Foundation, working with youngsters and sending tutors to schools with books on American heroes.

"If I have anything to leave," she said, "the foundation is my legacy."

She was voted into the National Track and Field Hall of Fame, the Helms Hall of Fame, the Women's Sports Foundation Hall of Fame and the Black Athletes Hall of Fame. In 1988, Tennessee State named an indoor track in her honor. In 1990, she became the first woman to receive the National Collegiate Athletic Association's

Silver Anniversary Award, even though she competed before the N.C.A.A. sponsored women's championships in any sport.

Once, when she was asked how certain other runners compared with her, she declined to answer. "I'm selfish," she said. "I think I was in a class all by myself."

She married William Ward in 1961 and was divorced the next year. In 1963, she married Robert Eldridge, whom she had known since second grade. They were divorced in 1976.

Her father died in 1961 and her mother died in May. She is survived by her four children with Mr. Eldridge -- daughters Yolanda Jones and Djuana Bowers and sons Robert and Xurry -- five sisters and two brothers, and seven grandchildren.

Correction: November 25, 1994

An obituary of Wilma Rudolph on Nov. 13, as well as a Sports of The Times column that day, misstated her accomplishment in winning three gold medals in track and field at the 1960 Olympics in Rome. She was the first American woman to win three or more medals in one Olympics, not the first woman; Fanny Blankers-Koen of the Netherlands won four gold medals at the 1948 Games in London.

A version of this obituary; biography appears in print on November 13, 1994, on Page 1001053 of the National edition with the headline: Wilma Rudolph, Star of the 1960 Olympics, Dies at 54.

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