Transcript
Dead Ladies Show Podcast Episode 74
Wilma Rudolph

(Dead Ladies Show Music - ‘Little Lily Swing’ by Tri-Tachyon)

SUSAN STONE: Welcome to the Dead Ladies Show Podcast. I'm Susan Stone. The Dead Ladies Show celebrates women, both overlooked and iconic, who achieved amazing things against the odds while they were alive. And we do it through women's history storytelling on stage here in Berlin and beyond. Then we bring you a selection of these stories here on the podcast. Here with me once again is DLS co-founder Katy Derbyshire. Hello there!

KATY DERBYSHIRE: Hi, Susan. Lovely to be here.

SUSAN STONE: Thank you for coming to my very warm living room.

KATY DERBYSHIRE: Studio, the studio, Susan.

SUSAN STONE: Yes, the sultry studio of Stone. We've even turned the fan off for you listeners. So Katy, did you watch any of the Olympics this summer?

KATY DERBYSHIRE: Susan, I have only one thing in common with Winston Churchill, and that is “no sports”. I have not watched any sports for years and years and years.

SUSAN STONE: Is the Olympics—yes it's sports, but is it art? It's cultural phenomena.

KATY DERBYSHIRE: I enjoyed listening to the coverage of it on the radio slightly more than I enjoyed listening to the football, the soccer coverage. Because it's a bit more varied, at least, that appeals to me. And there's quite a lot of interesting stories about the people involved, I will admit that.

SUSAN STONE: Well, that's kind of the best part is finding out who is doing what and why, and how do they overcome these odds to break these ridiculous world records and these feats of strength and speed. There really is something to it, I think, for a lot of us, even those like myself who don't really follow sport generally and make an exception once every four years.

KATY DERBYSHIRE: Yeah, ok,

SUSAN STONE: And we actually are going to continue it with the story that we have in this episode to take you to the finish line. It comes from our friends at Dead Ladies Show NYC, which is organized by Molly O'Laughlin Kemper, who co-hosts it with Sheila Enright, who will be presenting our Dead Lady this time around. Sheila Enright is

a writer and editor who also happens to be a former track and field runner, which is relevant.

KATY DERBYSHIRE: It is, because she's telling us all about Wilma Rudolph, the American track and field champion who went from being diagnosed with polio at a young age and told she would never walk again to winning her first Olympic medal at 16, and later being dubbed the world's fastest woman. Here's Sheila with more from New York's KGB Bar Red Room.

SHEILA ENRIGHT ON TAPE: Yes, I am wearing a Wilma Rudolph shirt that I found on eBay. Very excited about it. [AUDIENCE LAUGHS]

So I just want you all to imagine you're in a coliseum in Rome in 1960, so you're not a gladiator. [AUDIENCE LAUGHS] You're sitting in the audience and you're watching the final heat of the women's four by one race.

Wilma Rudolph has already won two races that day, and she is about to break the world record while also becoming the first woman in America to win three gold medals in a track and field event, or three gold medals, period. The sounds are going wild, the crowd is chanting, “Vilma, Vilma”, [AUDIENCE LAUGHS] because apparently that's how she remembers it.I don't know. And she is nothing but confident.

It's about 100 degrees, but it reminds her of her native Tennessee, and she's feeling good. She's feeling great. She gets the pass, runs down the straightaway, and boom, she has it. She has her third gold medal. She climbs onto the podium and she realizes, “this is something that nobody can take away from me.”

That is the beginning. But my beginning with Wilma Rudolph began with this book. [SHOWS SLIDE] It’s a children's book. It is a beautiful children's book. It's written by Kathleen Krull with illustrations by David Diaz. And spoiler alert—it tells the story of a young woman who overcomes crippling childhood polio to win three Olympic gold medals in track and field.

And as I was researching this presentation, I realized that there are a lot of children's books about Wilma. And it is little wonder why, for as *Sports illustrated* proclaimed a week after Wilma's untimely death at 54 years old, the Wilma Rudolph story is the stuff of fairy tales.

Only in her case, the fairy tale came true. And who doesn't love a fairy tale? A Cinderella rags-to-riches story. But reading Wilma's own autobiography and other narratives of her life present a different picture. And a more compelling one.

Of a woman noticing from a young age the inequality of the world around her and gaining a driving desire for something of her own. Something that no one could take away from her.

Wilma Rudolph was born on June 23, 1940 in Clarksville, Tennessee. She was the 20th of 22 children [AUDIENCE GASPS AND LAUGHS] from two moms, but her father had a wife and then she died. Anyway, sorry. They didn't all live together at the same time. She had a very busy household, but it wasn't insane. I don't know. I'm also from a big family! Anyway, I'm going to stop.

She grappled with the harsh realities of poverty in the American South. But for Wilma, family life was good. She recalled in her autobiography: “We didn't have too much money back then, but we had everything else, especially love.”

As a child, she was struck by the inequality of racial segregation, while people watching at the Clarksville County Fair. Wilma said that she realized then for the first time, “there were a lot of White people in the world and they belonged to a world that was nothing like the world we Black people lived in.”

Wilma's battle with health issues began early. Contracting polio as a young child left her with a severely weakened left leg, necessitating the use of a brace, which she hated because she said: “The brace always reminded me that there was something wrong with me.”

Her frequent illnesses also meant a very lonely childhood. As her siblings went to school and her mother went to work as a maid. Laying at home in bed, staring at the ceiling, she said: “I started acquiring a competitive spirit right then and there. I was gonna beat these illnesses no matter what.”

Wilma also had to start developing a certain mental toughness. because she remembered telling herself as a kid, “nobody loves you Wilma, you're just a sick and ugly kid.” But the person who would always pull her out of it was her mother, who did everything she could to take care of her.

Wilma said: “My doctors told me I would never walk again. My mother told me I would. I believed my mother.”

To give her daughter the best possible care, Wilma's mother Blanche took her on an hour long bus ride to Meharry Hospital, the Black Medical College in Nashville, Tennessee, 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, and her brothers and sisters helped too. Finally, by the age of 12, she could walk normally without crutches, braces or corrective shoes. The first moment, walking down the aisles of a church without a brace, was one of the most important moments in her life.

And I will say, it does feel like Forrest Gump stole this. [AUDIENCE LAUGHS] And it was a lot harder than just someone telling her to run. So anyway, the transition from a

sickly child to a promising athlete wasn't immediate. Wilma's first love was basketball, (as was mine). But despite putting in an immense amount of practice, she rode the bench for three years.

It was during this time that she said, “I learned some lessons about what it is like being a girl who loves sports.” [People told her] “you couldn't be a lady and a good athlete, and if you run around too much, you'll never be able to have children”, and “it'll be too much of a strain on your body.”

She said: “I always knew deep inside that this was a bunch of nonsense. I love to dress up and I love to play games.”

Her running talent was only recognized by chance by Coach Ed Temple, Tennessee State's track and field coach, who saw her play while moonlighting as a basketball referee, and knew she had talent.

Temple invited 14-year-old Wilma Rudolph to join his summer training program at Tennessee State, where she had some grueling practices, often running 18 to 20 miles a day. Wilma gradually honed her speed and technique. Her efforts paid off, and soon she was winning races.

She said: “I love the feeling of freedom and running, the fresh air, the feeling that the only person I was competing against was me.” Teachers recognized her talent and even allowed her to cut classes. In 1956, a 16-year-old high school junior, she ran in the Olympic trials and became the youngest member of the US Olympic team.

The Olympics were held in Melbourne that year, and people in Clarksville realized that she would need clothes and luggage to make the trip to Melbourne. So her neighbors pitched in to buy her new things. She said, “I have never forgotten those people to this day. I love them dearly for the help they gave me when I most needed it.”

The trip to Melbourne, Australia was Wilma's first time flying, and the journey included stops to places like Hawaii and Fiji, which were eye-opening experiences for someone from a small town in Tennessee. The excitement of being a part of the Olympic team and traveling internationally were tempered by the serious focus required for competition.

Wilma ran the 200 and the 4x100 meter relay, and the team ultimately, as you can see here, [SHOWS SLIDE] finished third and secured the bronze medal. Watching the other track events, Wilma was determined to return to the Olympics in four years.

Going home to Clarksville with her Olympic medal, Wilma continued to train and did other normal teenage things like date the captain of the basketball team, go to prom, smoke her first and only cigarette in the girls' locker room.

She also had sex, [AUDIENCE LAUGHS] which I mentioned because she did get

pregnant.

She had her physical before the start of her senior year and discovered she was pregnant. And this, ladies and gentlemen, is part of the fairy tale that is completely wiped out, wiped from the children's stories, glossed over by historians, and is what I think makes this tale of triumph amazing and incredulous.

It took Wilma four or five months to admit to her parents that she was pregnant. And in a lovely turn, her mother told her, “I'll stick with you no matter what.” And her dad said, first, I “forbid you from seeing Robert ever again. And two, don't worry about anything. Don't be ashamed of anything. Everybody makes mistakes.”

Coach Temple broke one of his own rules of not having mothers on the team and told Wilma, “I still want you to come to Tennessee State after the baby is born.”

As Wilma remembered it, “The people I loved were sticking by me and that took a lot of pain, pressure and guilt off my shoulders.”

When you read articles about her, they often mention: “Ms.Rudolph had to sit out this season due to illness.” And this was the illness. [SHOWS SLIDE] [AUDIENCE LAUGHS]

As Cat Ariall notes in her book, *Passing the Baton, Black Women Track Stars and the American Identity*, Wilma's unread pregnancy and single motherhood would be excised from her all-American image, an inconvenient, irrelevant, and ignorable instance.

Her baby is quickly explained away as an unfortunate event that fortunately did not interrupt her track career. It did not fit the narrative of the clean-cut lithe hero that the American public would later demand she be. In news reports, it explained that she was unable to run due to an illness.

She gave birth to a baby girl named Yolanda and started her freshman year at Tennessee State six weeks later. Her sister was watching the baby back home and she was not allowed to see her.

Her strong support system did help Wilma balance the responsibilities of motherhood and her aspirations on track and field, but she struggled to balance her multiple roles.

She wrote in her autobiography: “I was a freshman and that was a hard adjustment for me. I was running track and that took up a lot of my time. I had to keep up a two-point average in the classroom to keep my scholarship and stay in school and that meant I had to study. I was also a mother and I wondered how my baby was doing back home. Robert was dropping hints that I should drop out of school, quit track and become a full time wife and mother. It was tempting at times, I admit it. There were millions of times that I wanted to quit school and take the easy way.”

But she persevered, saying, “I didn't really want to be a housewife at such an early

age. I knew I could be a runner." Plus, there were some benefits. Wilma recalled, "I was much faster after I had the baby. My speed was tremendous." [AUDIENCE LAUGHS] And she would soon have the world record to prove it.

As one of the Tennessee State University's Tigerbelles under Coach Temple's rigorous training program, Wilma honed her skills and improved her performance. She began to make significant strides in her athletic career She competed at various national and international events, consistently improving her time and winning races. Her hard work paid off at the Olympic Trials, where she broke a world record, securing her place on the US Olympic team.

Her performances leading up to the Olympics established her as a favorite for the upcoming races in Rome. Wilma's performances at the 1960s Rome Olympics was nothing short of historic, but was not without hiccups.

The day before her scheduled race, she and some of her teammates started running through the sprinklers to cool off, and she fell into a hole and sprained her ankle, which immediately began swelling and bruising. Luckily, with ice and elevation overnight, she was able to hold her weight the next morning.

Despite a weak ankle, Wilma was nothing if not confident in Rome. She felt good in the heat and the crowds loved her. For the 100-meter race, she said: "When I reached 50 meters, I saw that I had them all, and I was just beginning to turn it on.By 70 meters, I knew the race was mine. Nobody was going to catch me. I won by 5 to 7 yards."

Her time was 11.2 seconds. [SHOWS SLIDE] That's the distance between gold and silver. For the 200— we're going to another one—she maintained her cool and she recalled: "It was raining, it was miserable out there, but I felt good.No real pressure, the 200 was mine. I loved it more than anyone else. And before the start of the race, I was saying to myself, 'there's nobody alive who can beat you at the 200. Go get it.'"

And she did. The final event was the 4x100 meter relay about which she said, "It was an easy race. Everyone ran their best and we won it going away. And as I broke the tape, the feeling of accomplishment welled up in me. The first American woman to win three gold medals. And I knew that was something that no one could ever take away from me."

From that moment, she became an icon, a symbol of American triumphalism in the midst of the Cold War. The *Nashville Tennessean* writer Raymond Johnson explained, "For one day at least, the space race, missile madness and all the rest disappeared into the subconscious as Wilma rocketed down the 100-meter straight-away in 11 seconds."

Wilma was ushered off the track into the limelight; [SHOWS SLIDE] this is her with all of her medals, meeting popes, prime ministers and her adoring public throughout Europe and America.

But Wilma saw this, her triumph, as a chance to open doors for others. When her hometown of Clarksville offered to throw her a parade and banquet in her honor, she insisted that the event be integrated. Clarksville was still a segregated city and the parade was actually the first integrated event in the history of the town.

The banquet that night was the first time in Clarksville's history that Blacks and Whites gathered under one roof. [SHOWS SLIDE] All right, so this is a picture of her in the parade. And I just wanted you to see that she has the face on the door of this Cadillac.

Despite her international acclaim, Wilma faced ongoing racial discrimination back home, a stark reminder of the societal barriers that still needed to be dismantled. Of the disconnect, Coach Temple recalled: “[It was] hooray, hooray after we got off the plane from Rome, but in a week we were back to second-class citizens.”

People wanted to be able to access Wilma's symbolic capital, but only if it served their ends. In the summer of 1963, Rudolph led a direct action protest in her hometown of Clarksville. Accompanied by 300 people, she attempted to integrate a local restaurant, the only one that was left unintegrated.

Although the press coverage of 1963 emphasized that there was no arrest, and only mentioned that the civil rights activists were harassed by “white youth”, Rudolph recalled in 1991 that she and others had been teargassed by the police: “The memory was still vivid as to what happened to me at Shoney's all those years ago. The humiliation I had felt, I had never been teargassed before.”

Despite the adversity she faced, Wilma kept running and breaking records. “I felt like an Amazon in the arena performing for bloodthirsty crowds. Nevertheless, no matter what city I was in, people turned out to see me run. So I felt I owed it to them to give them the very best performance I could possibly give, and I delivered it.”

She was the first woman to be invited to run in meets, like the Penn relays, pictured here, [SHOWS SLIDE] and the doors have been opened ever since.

She retired in 1962 after beating the Soviets. Yes, that was her reason for retiring. She was like, I beat them so I can retire. At the time of her retirement, she was still the world record holder in the 100 meter, 11.2, the 200 meter, 22.9. The current record is 10.49. And the other record for the 200 is 21.34. Both are held by Florence Griffith-Joyner, FloJo, if you know of her, who is pictured here with Wilma. [SHOWS SLIDE] She wanted to go out when she was at her peak, much like Jessie Owens, saying, “I couldn't top what I did, so I wanted to be remembered for what I was at my best.”

After retiring from track, Wilma married her high school sweetheart and graduated from college because she was 22 years old. [AUDIENCE LAUGHS] Imagine. She's described watching the 1964 Olympics in bed with her new baby. She thought it was great.

She worked in education as well as several community centers throughout the United States, but honestly struggled with the expectation of living up to her status as an American icon.

She said, “People were always expecting me to be a star, but I wasn't making the money to live like one. I was strictly an amateur in more ways than one. People came out to see me run, but the promoters made all of the money, not me.”

Noting the lack of sponsorships and financial support for women in sports, she quipped, “They weren't putting Black women on the Wheaties boxes in 1960s.”

It turns out, if you remember Caitlin Clark, giving women money for playing sports is still a problem today. But Wilma also critiqued the progressive movements that ignored the lived reality of Black Americans. In her autobiography, she said: “They're going around the country encouraging women to go out and get jobs. Black women have always worked…because they had to, not because they wanted to acquire new identities. They worked to feed their families. They didn't go to work to find fulfillment or adventure or glamour or romance, like so many white women think they're doing. Black women work out of necessity.”

But she did not let her frustrations with the limelight or lack of support after retirement, stop her from dedicating her life to advocacy and education. She became a powerful voice for women's equality in sports, using her platform to inspire young women. She said, “The triumph can't be had without the struggle, and I know what struggle is. I've spent a lifetime trying to share what it meant to be a woman first in the world of sports, so that other young women can have a chance to reach their dreams.”

She became a teacher and a coach, passing on her knowledge and inspiring the next generation of runners, sharing training tips with young female athletes, reassuring them of their ability. She also had three more children, and reflecting on being a mother, she said in her autobiography: “My own fulfillment comes from my family. I have no second thoughts about it. If I had to do it over again, I would have done it the very same way.”

Sadly, Wilma died at the age of 54 of a brain tumor. But her name and her story live on a US postage stamp, and a school in Berlin, believe it or not—shout out to the original Dead Ladies. As well as in countless other recognitions and awards.

Wilma Rudolph is one of my heroes. Taking a deep dive into her life only made me admire her more. I lost the “silent-sprinter-Cinderella” image I had in my mind since childhood, and the narrative of one spectacular individual rising against the odds alone. Wilma Rudolph could not have done what she did alone.

What I find in her story is not American exceptionalism, but American community, particularly the Black American community, who time and time again supported and nurtured Wilma when she was in need, who mentored her, clothed her, and coached her, who saw her ability and allowed her to run with it.

We think of running as an individual sport, but anyone who has stood in the crowds of the New York City Marathon, knows how beautiful and necessary that community is to the athletes running. What I find beautiful about Wilma is that she did not rest on her laurels, but worked to give others the same opportunities that she had. She understood no matter the outcome, no one runs the race alone. Thank you.

[AUDIENCE CHEERS AND APPLAUDS]

SUSAN STONE: Sheila Enright on Wilma Rudolph, recorded live in New York by Christopher Neil. Thank you, Chris, and thanks to everyone at Dead Ladies NYC, including the lively audience at the KGB Bar Red Room, which is overseen by the fantastic Lori Schwarz.

As always, you can find photos, links, and more info on our featured Dead Lady in our episode notes over at deadladiesshow.com/podcast.

And if you want more stars of track and field, check out our episode on Dutch gold medal runner, Fanny Blankers-Koen, which aired way back in season one of our show.

KATY DERBYSHIRE: It was a good show, it was a good show. You lucky New Yorkers, you can go and see Sheila and Molly and some other wonderful people at a Dead Ladies NYC show on September the 25th. Featured ladies will be the philosopher Simone Weil, actress Barbara Payton and comedian Phyllis Diller. Check them out on Instagram @deadladiesnyc for more.

SUSAN STONE: And if you're in Berlin, do come see us at PodFest Berlin, which runs from the 7th to the 15th of September in the House of Color in Kreuzberg. Our show will be on Saturday the 14th at 4 p.m. so please put that in your calendars. We'll have more details and advance ticket info very soon. So make sure you're following us on social media @deadladiesshow or have signed up for our newsletter, and we'll put a link for you in the show notes. And we look forward to seeing you there.

KATY DERBYSHIRE: If you are unlucky enough to be unable to come and see us in person, but you would still like to support us, do visit us at patreon.com/deadladiesshowpodcast, all one word, where you can find fun book-themed features and interviews.

SUSAN STONE: That's right. And in our most recent edition, you and I are talking about a truly fascinating woman. It's the backstory behind The Beat Girl, aka Brigitte Bond amongst other names, the toast of 60s London, and so much more.

KATY DERBYSHIRE: Yeah, we had a lot of fun recording that, didn't we?: Obviously you have to sign up to learn. It was, it's worth it though.

SUSAN STONE: Yeah, don't miss it.

The Dead Ladies Show was founded by Florian Duijsens and Katy Derbyshire. The podcast is created, produced and edited by me, Susan Stone.

KATY DERBYSHIRE: Our theme tune is Little Lily Swing by Tri-Tachyon.

We'll be back again soon with another fabulous Dead Lady. Goodbye!

(Dead Ladies Show Music - ‘Little Lily Swing’ by Tri-Tachyon)