



Going the Distance

The stories of Wilma Rudolph and Jesse Owens

Recommended Ages 6 to 12
(Grades 1 to 6)

*With added material for
Middle School Audiences*

A Reproducible Learning Guide for Educators

Created by Morgan Charéce Hall

This guide is designed to help educators prepare for, enjoy, and discuss *Going the Distance*.

It contains background, discussion questions and activities appropriate for ages 6 to 12 with added material for middle school audiences.

Programs Are Made Possible, In Part, By Generous Gifts From:

The Nora Roberts Foundation
Smithsonian Women's Committee
Sommer Endowment



Smithsonian Associates

Discovery Theater • P.O. Box 23293, Washington, DC • www.discoverytheater.org

Like us on **Facebook** • Follow us on Twitter: **Smithsonian Kids** • Follow us on Instagram: **SmithsonianAssociates**

Overcoming Obstacles

All of us face **obstacles**: problems that make it harder to move ahead toward our goals.

Sometimes these obstacles seem impossible to go around or climb over. Maybe we can't afford the lessons or expensive equipment we need. Maybe our bodies let us down through illness or disability. Maybe laws and people's prejudices keep us from participating in activities or occupations open to others simply because of the color of our skin or beliefs.

Sports legends **Wilma Rudolph** and **Jesse Owens** faced obstacles like these. Although they grew up to become Olympian runners, they endured serious illnesses as children and their families were so poor that they could barely afford medical care. On top of their **chronic illnesses**, they also had to endure **racism**—prejudice, discrimination, or antagonism directed against a person or people based on their membership in a particular racial or ethnic group, typically one that is a minority or marginalized. Rudolph and Owens broke barriers during a time when the rules of professional athletics prohibited many African-American and black athletes from competing with white athletes, no matter how good they were.

Wilma and Jesse are heroes for all of who have ever said, "I can't, because I'm not strong enough," or "not smart enough," or "not rich enough." In the end, it was their courage and determination that made them winners – and those are qualities anyone can share

Because they never gave up, because they kept working hard at what they loved best, both succeeded despite the odds against them.

- Each of them set Olympic track records – as well as records for numbers of gold medals won!
- Each earned the title of "The World's Fastest."
- Each was named Athlete of the Year
- Their names are still honored around the world.
- Jesse Owens received three different presidential awards, including the Medal of Freedom, the highest U.S. civilian honor.

Jesse Owens (1913-1980)

James Cleveland “Jesse” Owens was born in Danville, Alabama on September 12, 1913. Owens' grandparents had been enslaved and his parents were sharecroppers—farmers who worked on land they rented from a white landowner. A thin child with weak lungs, he suffered from **pneumonia** repeatedly, coming close to death more than once. By the time he was six, Jesse had gained enough strength to attend school in a one-room shack, and to fish, swim, and help work on the farm like his nine older brothers and sisters. “J.C.”, as he was called, was nine when the family moved to Cleveland, Ohio, where his new schoolteacher gave him the name that was to become known around the world. The teacher was told “J.C.” when she asked his name to enter in her roll book, but she thought he said “Jesse”. The name stuck and he would be known as Jesse Owens for the rest of his life.

When Jesse and his family moved to Ohio, he joined the track team. To everyone’s amazement, he was fast—and, as he practiced, he kept getting faster. While at Fairmount Junior High School Owens developed a passion for running, and he gained national attention for his athleticism while at East Technical High School. Owens went on to attend Ohio State University, where he won many track and field awards. In 1935, at a Big Ten track meet, Owens set three world records and tied a fourth within the span of an hour.

Despite his athletic success, Owens was subject to frequent discrimination. Racism was widespread throughout the 1930s under **Jim Crow Laws**. These were laws intended to prevent African Americans from having equal rights with white Americans. But Owens **persevered** through it all. He broke world records throughout junior high, high school, college, and still maintained several jobs to help support his family! In 1936, Jesse was asked to join the United States Olympic team.

Olympic competition is always a challenge for athletes, but more than usual was riding on the Games that year. They were being held in Berlin, Germany, and fanatical German leader, Adolf Hitler, was counting on the games to prove that the Germans belong to a “master race” who were stronger and smarter than anyone else—especially non-white and Jewish people. In 1936, he and his Nazi followers would start World War II in an attempt to force these racist views on the world.

At the Olympics, the whole world watched Jesse. Could this extraordinary African American defeat the long-jumper Luz Long, Hitler’s champion? Jesse captured gold at the long jump, and as a runner, too—breaking ten Olympic records and winning four gold medals in all. “I wanted no part of politics,” Jesse said later, “And I wasn’t in Berlin to compete against any one athlete. The purpose of the Olympics, anyway, was to do your best... The only victory that counts is the one over yourself.”

Near the end of Jesse’s life, President Ford awarded him the Medal of Freedom for his contributions to his country as well as for his achievements in sports. President Carter later named him an American Living Legend. When Jesse died in 1980, family and friends established the Jesse Owens Foundation to provide scholarships to students “who have demonstrated—through academic achievement, athletics, community service or in other ways—that they have the courage to overcome personal, family or social circumstances.”

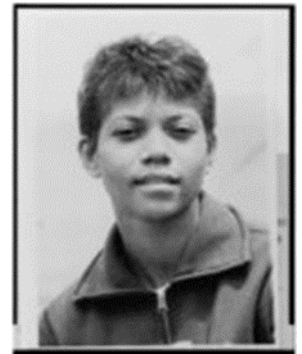
“We all have dreams. But in order to make dreams come into reality, it takes an awful lot of determination, dedication, self-discipline, and effort.” — Jesse Owens



Zaccardi, N. (2016, February 13). 'More Than Gold': Documentary on Jesse Owens. Retrieved October 28, 2019.

Wilma Rudolph (1940-1994)

In 1940, four years after Jesse Owens made his record-setting appearance at the Olympics, **Wilma Glodean Rudolph** was born in St. Bethlehem, Tennessee. Wilma was the 20th of 22 siblings in her family and was born prematurely on June 23, 1940. From birth Wilma fought one illness after another. She contracted **pneumonia** and **scarlet fever**, and at the age of five she contracted **polio**. She recovered from the virus but lost strength in her left leg and foot. Due to racism and **segregation** there was little to no medical care available to African American residents of Clarksville in the 1940s. Rudolph's parents were able to seek treatment for her in Nashville, TN, but doctors were sure Wilma would never be able to walk again.



Wilma Rudolph via
Library of Congress

Wilma and her family had other ideas. Twice a week, she and her mother took the fifty-mile bus trip to Nashville, where doctors showed them special exercises to strengthen her muscles. Sometimes the exercises hurt, but Wilma practiced them anyway, over and over.

Her many brothers and sisters pitched in, helping to move and massage the weakened leg. After several years, eight-year-old Wilma was able to walk by strapping her leg into a heavy metal **brace**. Determined to run, jump, and play basketball with the other kids, Wilma kept exercising. By age twelve, with her family cheering her on, Wilma discarded the brace. At last, she could throw herself into the active sports she'd always loved to watch.



The Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica
(2019, June 19).
Retrieved October 28, 2019.

Before long Wilma was the star of the high school basketball team, taking the school all the way to the state final. As a sophomore, she broke the girls' state record for most baskets scored. At track meets, she outran everyone, remaining undefeated throughout her high school sprinting career. Nicknamed "**Skeeter**" for her famous speed, Wilma Rudolph qualified for the 1956 Summer Olympic Games in Melbourne, Australia.

The youngest member of the U.S. track and field team at age 16, she won a bronze medal in the 400-meter relay. After finishing high school, Tennessee State University offered her a full athletic scholarship and Wilma became the first person in her family to go to college. Rudolph enrolled at Tennessee State University, where she studied education. She also trained hard for the next Olympics.

The years of Wilma's greatest public triumphs were 1960 and 1961. In 1960, at the Olympic Games in Rome, she sprinted her way to three gold medals. Besides her Olympic gold, Wilma won almost every top sports award, including the United Press Athlete of the Year. She helped break down gender barriers when she was invited to compete in events that were usually open to men only. Even after she stopped competing, Wilma's determination carried her forward. She became a teacher, a track coach, a broadcaster, and like Jesse, an

inspiring speaker. Finally, she established the Wilma Rudolph Foundation to support young athletes and teach them that they, too, can succeed, despite the odds against them.

"Winning is great, sure, but if you are really going to do something in life, the secret is learning how to lose. Nobody goes undefeated all the time. If you can pick up after a crushing defeat, and go on to win again, you are going to be a champion someday." -Wilma Rudolph

The History of the Olympics

The original “**Olympian Games**” took place in Olympia, Greece more than 2700 years ago. Only Greek-speaking men could compete (women could not even watch). These athletes tested their skill and strength in racing, wrestling, jumping, and throwing events. Winners received a crown of olive leaves and were treated like heroes for the rest of their lives. Many centuries later, a Frenchman named Pierre de Coubertin worked to revive the Olympic Games. He hoped to build a better, more peaceful world by having athletes from all countries compete in a spirit of friendship and fair play. In 1896, his vision became reality when the first modern Olympics were held in Athens, Greece. The number of sports played at the Olympics has tripled since de Coubertin’s time, but the modern Games still take place every four years, hosted in one nation in the world each time.



25c Jesse Owens stamp - United States Postal Service - Google Arts & Culture. (n.d.). Retrieved October 28, 2019.

The only prizes given at the Olympic are medals—**gold for first place in each event, silver for second place, and bronze for third place.** Although thousands of athletes take part in the Olympics, only a few can win medals. Still, every Olympian is a winner. Each one has trained for years to win a spot on their country’s Olympic team. Many, like Wilma and Jesse, overcame sickness, poverty, or other hardships. Every one of them has worked hard to be the best they possibly can at the sport they love.

For More Information, Check Out These Resources!

Jessie Owens Olympic Legend

[Biography](#) | [The Story of the Olympic Legend](#) | [Jesse Owens](#)

Wilma Rudolf Biography

www.biography.com/athlete/wilma-rudolph

www.womenshistory.org/education-resources/biographies/wilma-rudolph

Jessie Owens Biography

www.biography.com/athlete/jesse-owens

www.olympic.org/jesse-owens

<https://bit.ly/2Dzalxc>



23-cent Wilma Rudolph. (n.d.). Retrieved October 28, 2019.

READ

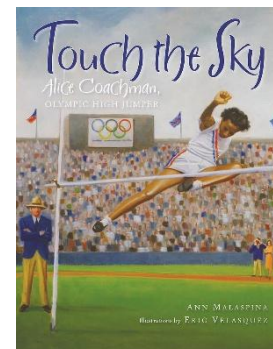
Touch the Sky: Alice Coachman, Olympic High Jumper

By: Ann Malaspina

Illustrated by: Eric Velasquez

In Alice Coachman's Georgia hometown, there was no track where an African-American girl could practice, so she made her own crossbar with sticks and rags. With the support of her coach, friends, and community, Alice started to win medals. Her dream to compete at the Olympics came true in 1948. This is an inspiring free-verse story of the first African-American woman to win an Olympic gold medal.

Learn more: [Touch the Sky: Alice Coachman, Olympic High Jumper: Malaspina, Ann, Velasquez, Eric: 9780807580356: Amazon.com: Books](#)



SMITHSONIAN CONNECTION

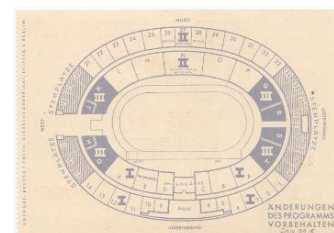
In Our Collection:

Ticket Stub for the 1938 Summer Olympics in Berlin (1938)

This ticket stub is for the track and field event (*Leichtathletik*) at the 1938 Summer Olympics in Berlin on the same day that Jesse Owens won his third Olympic gold medal!

From the collections at the National Museum of African American History and Culture.

Learn more: [Ticket stub for the 1936 Berlin Summer Olympics | Smithsonian Institution](#)

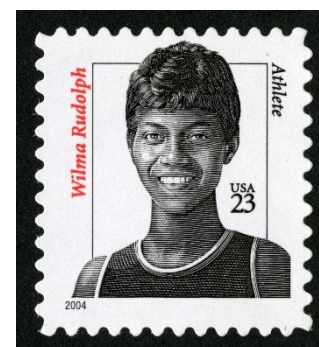


23c Distinguished Americans: Wilma Rudolph Single (2004)

In 2004, the United States Postal service released new stamps in a collection they later called. *Distinguished Americans*, which was a continuation of their *Great Americans Series*. One of these Distinguished Americans featured in the stamps was Wilma Rudolph.

From the collections at the National Postal Museum.

Learn more: [23c Distinguished Americans: Wilma Rudolph single | Smithsonian Institution](#)



Activities & Discussion for Grades 1-6

How Long is Long?

- When he competed in the Olympics, Owens was a grown man. **How did he do as a kid?**
 - Outside or in a hallway, measure off a distance of **22 feet, 11 ¾ inches**. That's how far Jesse Owens jumped as a **middle schooler** in 1928, when he set a new Junior High School running broad jump world record!
- Next, measure off a distance of **26 feet and 5 ¼ inches**. That's the length of the jump that gained Jesse another world record and the gold medal in the 1936 Olympics.
- Try it yourself! **How close can you come to jumping like Jesse?**



Make Your Own Medal!

What are you proud of? Who makes you feel proud?

Make a medal for yourself or for someone who helped you. Using cardboard, pens, markers, glue, and ribbons, have them design, color, and cut out their medals, then glue ribbons on them. Share them with the class with a HALL OF FAME where students present their medals to the class.

How Fast is Fast?

Wilma and Jesse both set records in the 100-meter sprint, winning the title of **"The World's Fastest Man"** and **"The World's Fastest Woman."**

1. Outside, measure off 100 meters.
2. Using a stopwatch (or counting each second as "one-thousand one," "one-thousand two," etc.), experience how long Jesse and Wilma took to run that distance (Jesse, 10.3 seconds; Wilma, 11 seconds).
3. Now, you try it. Have your friends time you. See who's "The Fastest Man" and "The Fastest Woman" in your class!



Fame and Fortune

- Many honors came to Jesse and Wilma once they became champions. Important streets in the capital of the Ivory Coast and in Berlin, Germany are named after Jesse Owens. Wilma's birthday, June 23rd, is now **"Wilma Rudolph Day"** in her home state of Tennessee.
- What would you like to be **famous** for?
- What would you like to have named after you? Why?

Obstacles – of course!

Athletes sometimes race over an **obstacle course**—a trail laid out with artificial obstacles to climb over, jump over, shimmy under, or go around. Just as overcoming life’s obstacles makes us strong and **resilient**, running an obstacle course calls for more flexibility and uses more muscles than running on a smooth track. Besides, it’s fun!



- You can make your own obstacle course. Mark a trail. Then set up cones to run around or boxes to jump over. Think of ways to make runners zig-zag, leap, climb, or crawl. Exercise your imagination!
- When you’ve finished, get ready to run. If you want, time yourself. Then run the course again. Was it easier? Chances are, like Jesse and Wilma, you’ll get better with practice.
- Not all obstacles are physical ones. What were Jesse and Wilma’s first obstacles? **What did they do to overcome them?**
- Name some obstacles in your life, or in the life of someone you know. What can a person do to overcome them? Strategize with your class and share your thoughts.

Activities & Discussion Questions for Grades 6-9

Simple Obstacle Exercise

- Begin by asking students to clear their desks.
- Then ask the class to try to tie one of their shoes using only one hand.
- If students do not have shoes that lace up, tell them to try using their neighbor’s sneaker.
 - Give students about 30 seconds to attempt this, then ask them to tie their shoes properly and place both feet on the floor.
- In order to make sure students’ hands are off their shoes, next ask them to take out a pencil and paper and try to write their names with the opposite hand. After they attempt this, ask each student to put the pencil and paper in their desk.
- Ask the students if these tasks were difficult and explain that these activities were examples of challenges. We all face challenges in life, some of them are simple, like trying to tie their shoes with one hand, while others are much more difficult
- Obstacles aren’t just in track and field. Name some obstacles in your life, or in the life of someone you know. What can a person do to overcome them? Make an “Life Obstacle Course” and then, as a class, strategize with ways to overcome them, as Wilma and Jesse did.”

Discussion Questions

1. Some people argue that sports and politics should be kept separate. Others argue that sports are always political. Introduce students to the debate over the proposal to boycott the 1936 Olympics in Germany. Have the class debate the pros and cons of the proposal. You may choose to broaden this discussion by including the boycotts of the Olympics by African nations in 1976, the U.S. in 1980, and the Soviet Union in

1984. Were these good or bad ideas? Who benefitted from these boycotts? Who did not?

2. Why were the 1936 Olympics so important? Jesse Owens won his gold medals in the Olympics at a very young age. But his life did not magically become golden, although his medals were. Do a research project about Jesse's later years. What did he have to overcome AFTER the cheering had stopped?
3. Learn more about the two African American women in the Olympics featured in our show. Wilma Rudolph shattered records and paved the way for women in sports today. Learn about her life and accomplishments with this Biography Channel feature at <https://youtu.be/BYQXYVwa4YE> . And her coach, Dr. Nell Jackson was the first African-American to be named head coach of the U.S. Olympic Women's Track and Field Team and was a pioneer in women's track. See Alabama Legacy's short video <http://www.alabamalegacy.org/nell-jackson/>.

**Research Wilma and Nell further.
What did else did they accomplish after retiring from track?**

Name Game and Discussion

1. Wilma Rudolph and Jesse Owens had a lot of nicknames. "Jessie" is actually a nickname that came about when J.C. Owens' teacher could not understand his southern accent. He was also called the "Buckeye Bullet" due to his speed. Wilma was nicknamed "Skeeter" by her coach and "The Black Gazelle" by many people that were astonished by her speed.
 - Often we are given nicknames based on traits and skills that we have.
 - Do you have any nicknames that you want to share?
 - Where did they come from?
 - How do you feel when people call you by your nickname?
 - Have students break up in small groups and discuss.
 - Then ask students to share a nickname that they are comfortable sharing and create a gesture to go with it.
 - Students gather in a circle present their names and gestures and everyone in the circle repeats until everyone is finished.
 - Another option is to have students break in pairs and list positive qualities and skills that someone in the class has and everyone in class gets a nickname?
2. Get Up Stand Up!
 - Instructor's will ask students: *What needs to change? What is an issue what you want to change?*
 - Instructors will then present statements. If the students agree they should stand or sit if they disagree
 - Examples: Climate Change effects all of us! Littering is not a problem! College should be free for all! Recess and nap time should be extended into High School!
 - One at a time, say a statement out loud. Give them topics that are meaningful, but that will give you some differing opinions. The goal is to have some students standing and sitting
 - *Transition: Have you ever stood up for something? What does that mean? What challenges might you face by taking a stand for something? Is it easy or hard to stand up for something you believe in? Have you ever felt like you can't make a difference? Wilma Rudolph was civil rights activist and a feminist. Research her accomplishments after she retired. How did she continue to make a difference and stand up for what was right?*

Discovery Theater



About Discovery Theater

Since 1979, Discovery Theater, the unique, DC-based museum theater has served as a gateway to Smithsonian exhibitions, collections, and themes. Through the joy of live stage performances, students from pre-K through 6th grade are immersed in global cultures, eco-science, living history, and traditional arts. Discovery Theater performances are created to complement students' classroom-based learning; to enrich audiences' knowledge of the arts, history, sciences, and cultures of the world; to foster a love of live theater; and to provide entertaining, educational museum-based interactive experiences.

Don't Miss Our Upcoming Shows!

Walloping Weather!

Wed.-Fri., March 11-13, 2026 at 10:15 a.m. and 11:30 a.m.

Recommended for Ages: 6 to 11 / Grades 1 to 6



Mother Earth and Me

Tues.-Fri., April 28 – May 1, 2026 at 10:15 a.m. and 11:30 a.m.

Recommended for Ages: 7 to 11 / Grades 2 – 6

