

Wilma Rudolph

1190 TN HWY 48 • Rev. Howard Brown, Artist
by Marlon Scott

When the sun rises over Clarksville and clears the mist over the Cumberland River, it also sheds light on the likeness of Clarksville's most famous woman athlete. At the intersection of College Street and Riverside Drive, next to the pedestrian overpass sits a bronze statue of Wilma Rudolph.

The fastest woman in the world, the black gazelle and the black pearl are just a few of the names the legendary Wilma Rudolph earned after she won three gold medals at the 1960 Olympics in Rome. Her story of rising from poverty and childhood disease to Olympic fame as well as her incredible list of awards is well known.

It is no wonder Clarksville renamed a street after her in 1994 and later erected a statue in her honor. In fact, June 23 is Wilma Rudolph Day in Tennessee.

The statue was created by local artist Howard Brown. Alum of Austin Peay State University, Brown has several pieces displayed in Clarksville. He was also a friend of Rudolph's family.

Brown said after being commissioned to do the piece he spoke with some of Rudolph's family members about what to create. He also said when he began work on the piece; he didn't start with a sketch or mock up. Instead, he just sat down and started working with the clay.

Inevitably, Brown ended up creating Rudolph in her classic crossing the finish line pose.

This pose features Rudolph in her running clothes and shoes, her legs extended in her running stride, only her toes touching the black, marble base. Rudolph's arms are both bent with the hands palms open and her head is thrown back, extending her chest forward to break the finish line tape.

The statue is a snapshot of Rudolph doing what she is best known for, crossing the finish line first.

Brown said after he constructed the model it was then cast in bronze at the Bright Foundry in Louisville, Ky. He admitted the six-step process it took to cast the work in bronze fascinated him.

The foundry first makes a mold of the piece using rubber to capture the details and textures the artist intended. Next they apply wax which helps create a clean bronze surface. The waxes are

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then hand dipped to create a ceramic shell that preserves the surface quality of the original work.

With the shell made, the molten bronze is poured, recreating the work in bronze pieces that are welded together and finished with a patina that is developed with the artist to create the artist's vision of the piece.

Because of the size of the Rudolph statue, it had to be divided into three large pieces. Brown drove the pieces back to Clarksville himself for the reconstruction on the specially made black, marble base.

The base resembles the short stair Medal winners stand on to receive their awards in the Olympics. The front has Rudolph's name inscribed in gold. On the top directly under Rudolph's figure reads the following:

USA
The First
Woman Athlete to win
Three gold medals
In one Olympics
Rome, Italy 1960

The statue and base both rest on another stone base adorned with small bronze plaques. Each plaque came from an organization that contributed to have the piece made.

A plaque behind the piece lists all the individual contributors.

The piece was moved a number of times, but now resides outside the entrance of athlete's namesake building, the Wilma Rudolph Event Center.

The statue is a fitting testament to a revered local legend.

Wilma Rudolph

