

Olympic Winners of Polio Disease

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No one can jump a centimetre higher than the height he can jump, nor run a minute longer than the length he can run. The limits of his success are determined solely by his own physical and moral strength.

Pierre de Coubertin
(From *Ode to Sport*)

Summary

The aim of this article is to recall the somewhat forgotten Olympic winners (Ray Ewry, Walt Davis, Wilma Rudolph) who contracted Heine-Medina disease in their childhood. Thanks to rehabilitation, they regained their temporarily lost mobility. Physical activity became the meaning of their lives and as adults, they became Olympic champions. They were true heroes of sport, and thanks to them, sport became richer in personalities, remarkably worth following and giving hope to those who doubt (those ill) their own abilities.

Keywords: Polio, rehabilitation, Olympic Games, personality, history of sport

The history of physical culture is, among others, the history of sport, which is very vital and, thanks to Olympic sport, it is more vital than one may think. This is related to the fact that the dynamic development of modern sport has made it the subject of observation for specialists in various fields, the subject of many scientific conferences and an attractive topic of journalism and television debates accompanying great sports events. The audience eagerly refers to the past issues of Olympic sport, which since 1896, have been attracting the attention of the largest audience worldwide, who want to witness new records being set by the heroes of global sport. The history of this phenomenon, which creates heroes equal to the great figures of individual countries and nations, despite all opinions and prejudices, is still vital because it still requires not so much verification of the facts themselves, but a re-reading of information contained in sources, and thus, a renewed biographical narrative of Olympic champions, which would also consider the psychosomatic basis of sports success. The re-explication of agonism may allow for a better understanding of the causal relationship (mystery?) between the soul and the body, indispensable in a professional sports. Considering the history of the Olympic Games through the prism of their heroes (medallists), it would be interesting to take their psychosomatic background into account¹. It would be possible to consider biological rhythm, its disruptions related to starts on a foreign continent, or the change of time zones and climate. A special reflection influencing

the achievement of form and appropriate results should be given to the support measures, those permitted and forbidden, as well as diet. Works, in which the achievements of outstanding people in sport are demonstrated, it is necessary to skilfully combine the biological aspect with cultural perspective. Therefore, the role of somatic and mental health, resistance to stressors, and the ability to cope with failure and fatigue, cannot be overlooked. It was these factors that had significant influence on the sporting success on the legendary Jessie Owens, who as a guest of the International Olympic Academy in 1969, stated that “there is no greater glory than that achieved by victory in the Olympic arenas, in the fight against equals, when all are champions in their own measure”². Therefore, in historical research on the Olympic Games, the most important explanation seems to be that causal, which has greatly contributed to the success achieved.

The dual role of illness in sport

The myth of ancient Greek agonism shaped modern sport, playing an extraordinary role in the Olympic idea of building and creating sport-life models in most countries and nations, shaping the ideal for following generations of athletes. The sport of ancient Hellas has left us with the image of an athlete-hero, as well as a way of documenting his/her achievements. The attribute of

¹ The same should concern coaches, judges, activists.

² As cited in: T. Olszański, *Wyżej nad poprzeczkę* [Eng. Higher than the Threshold], Warsaw 1976, p. 65.

a hero was the impeccable figure and extraordinary vigour that belonged only to the hero, usually a descendant of a god and mortal mother, performing prominent deeds and worshiped as a deity after death. In life, this demigod status was enjoyed only by ancient athletes, who were specific intermediaries between gods and people, manifested in the privilege of actively (sporting) celebrating the most important holidays for Greeks. Monuments were erected for the winners during their lifetime; their exploits and names were recorded in history. Created by ancient writers, the myth of the athlete has been appropriated by modern sport, and its main character is a modern agonist who, by taking part in sports efforts, embodies the ancient existential principle of *mens sana in corpore sana*. As Pierre de Coubertin rightly noted, sports successes are the result of perfecting the physical body, which “can be strengthened, made more agile, dexterous and durable, more harmonious. We can achieve this through persistent exercises or well-understood training, especially when it is accompanied by favourable circumstances. But in this refinement of the human body, for the sake of sporting success, mental qualities play an enormous, sometimes even decisive role”³. Another factor mentioned by Coubertin cannot be overlooked. It was an external factor, by which he meant “the improvement of sports equipment and devices as well as the conditions accompanying the training of individual sports”⁴. The essence of the phenomenon of sport from its historical origins is competition, which is expressed by the idea of *citius altius fortius*, assuming that anyone who intends to participate in an effort, must be healthy and void of motor dysfunctions. This conviction accompanies the perception of sport, which has been and is reinforced by documentary filmmakers, who usually reduce their studies to a record of the achieved results and more or less extensive biographical notes. Although they usually contain scant information, in their narrative, they still appeal to the imagination of the audience, who create the image of a competitor as – an aristocrat of sport (“of completely egalitarian origin”). distinguished by “only an advantage of the body and physical properties raised to a certain level, the will to improve”⁵. This will to improve was especially important in the case of the heroes’ slayers, who won Olympic gold (Nobel prize in sport) despite their illness, disability or injury. Sports archivists often ignore this fact (disease), as did ancient annals⁶. Yet they seem to have played a key

role in achieving success. Thus, illness and the will to overcome it can be a motivating factor to fight the demons of fleshly weakness. In this battle, sport seems to be of great significance, as Pierre de Coubertin emphasized when he wrote: “O Sport, you are Audacity! The meaning of all muscular effort can be summed up in the word ‘dare’. What good are muscles, what is the point of feeling strong and agile, and why work to improve one’s agility and strength, unless it is in order to dare?”⁷.

Test yourself, or rather give yourself a chance, overcome your weakness, dare; these words were probably repeated by the conquerors of Olympic heroes who correctly understood the opinion that “the strength of an athlete does not lie solely in his muscles, and the obstacle in his path to success is not only the imperfection of its members. Mental qualities, the presence or absence of which so greatly affect an athlete’s value, occupy the first place in his self-assessment”⁸. These words wholly apply to athletes who have been injured, seriously ill, and as “healed”, have competed with fit athletes, achieving the best possible results.

Man is a bio-psycho-social being who, when experiencing an unexpected change, especially one that is negative (trauma, illness), becomes aware of the discrepancy between the former self-image and the existing one, i.e. a new vision of the future, including the reaction of the environment to oneself. K. Jankowski claims that “the disintegration associated with the breakdown of an individual’s value system, loss of self-confidence, expressed by symptoms of neurosis and anxiety, may be the starting point for such a transformation of the personality that leads to development”. The author adds that “secondary factors related to the social and psychological conditions of the disabled person’s functioning, outweigh the primary causes”⁹. K. Dąbrowski assumes that “from negative disintegration (proper to the state immediately after realising the new situation), under the influence of rational rehabilitation, one can attain – and many people reach this level – positive disintegration, which is a developmental process that marks the way to secondary integration”¹⁰. Positive disintegration is multi-level – as opposed to psychological and one-level – it is characterised by: consciousness, self-awareness, self-control, mental plasticity, creative concepts, lack or weakness of stereotypical and automatic elements. In human activity – e.g. work, science, sport – amateur after Olympic – the aim is to obtain a higher level of knowledge, motor skills, in order to achieve the adopted goal. Motivation is triggered – e.g. improve fitness, swimming skills to equal or even exceed the level of a colleague.

(204 B.C.). See: M. Golden, *Sport in the Ancient World from A to Z*, London 2004, pp. 50, 85.

³ P. de Coubertin, *Ode to Sport*, cit., p. 65.

⁴ P. de Coubertin, *Know Thyself*, p. 63

⁵ K. Jankowski, *Człowiek i choroba* [Eng. *Man and Illness*], Warsaw 1975, pp. 76, 173

⁶ K. Dąbrowski, *Dezintegracja pozytywna* [Eng. *Positive Disintegration*], Warsaw 1979, pp. 11, 26.

³ P. de Coubertin, *Źródła i granice sukcesów w sporcie* Pierre de Coubertin. Przemówienia. Pisma różne i listy [Eng. *Sources and Limits of Success in Sport – Pierre de Coubertin. Speeches. Various Writings and Letters*], Warsaw 1994, p. 144.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 145.

⁵ P. de Coubertin, *Filozoficzne podstawy nowożytnego olimpiizmu* [Philosophical Foundations of Modern Olympism]. *Idem, Przemówienia. Pisma różne i listy* [Eng. *Speeches. Various Writings and Letters*], Warsaw 1994, p. 134.

⁶ At a museum in Olympia, there is a disk with an inscription commemorating the victory of the paralysed wrestler Democritus

In this way, we confirm the increase in our own importance. This motivation is hubristic. Hubristic motivation as well as the adopted model of excellence are implicit in sport¹¹. Formally, the athlete's aspiration to achieve the "Olympic minimum"¹². Does someone who has had their crushed upper limb "saved" not want to prove that "with one upper limb" – you can run well? Does the girl, who was rejuvenated after the effects of Heine-Medin's disease, not want to prove that she is as fast on the treadmill as she is on the basketball court? On this occasion, does her character not demonstrate? Is it impossible to show football virtuosity practically being a cripple? The answer to these questions is the conclusion that in sport, a person not fully fit "can most easily cross the barrier of mental and physical inhibition"¹³. As an example – a few profiles of outstanding athletes, it is possible to show that the impact of the disease does not always have to be only negative. Their instances allow to demonstrate how complex and differentiated mechanisms of the human body are and how they influence both the psyche and the effects of training. In this way, the healing qualities of movement may also be exhibited, as well as the role of awakening motivation to work on oneself, i.e. self-revalidation leading to self-confidence in one's own abilities and providing a model for disabled people with (still) weak motivation.

Olympic heroes

Illness (injury) comes on horseback suddenly, but leaves slowly on foot¹⁴. The Olympians, who fell ill with polio in their childhood and cured themselves through rehabilitation, became convinced of this truth. Physical activity became the meaning of their lives. As adults, despite their handicaps, they decided to compete with heroes. A hero (in sports) can be seen in every Olympian who has qualified for participation in the games. Thus, those who have defeated the heroes can be called hero-busters. This elite group includes the following athletes from the United States: Ray Ewry, Walt Davis and Wilma Rudolph¹⁵.

Raymond Clarence "Ray" Ewry was born on October 14, 1873 in Lafayette, Indiana. Life was hard on him. He was orphaned at the age of 5. When he was 7, he

developed polio. Child paralysis was a disease that left one crippled. There was no cure. Attempts were undertaken to counteract its effects by alternating (hot and cold) compresses to prevent the muscles from becoming spastic. These methods did not save him from his legs becoming deformed and with muscular dystrophy. He spent his childhood in a wheelchair, without playing or moving. It is not known at what age he decided to fight his own infirmity. A doctor came to the rescue who "told him that it is possible to use appropriate exercises to move each muscle individually and to restore their fitness. You just have to find them"¹⁶. So he began with Ewry by studying anatomy in order to develop special exercises for himself. He practiced, systematically believing in their effectiveness. In a letter to a friend who was spending holidays with his parents at the seaside, he wrote: "How I envy you, but I will also be swimming soon, you will see, it will certainly be so. I have now built a new device for myself, I pull the string, the board under my knees rises and my legs bend slightly. If I pulled harder, my knees would have bent completely, but it's so painful. Well, I pull every now and then slightly. I drew a scale on the wall so that I could go up every day at least half a centimetre. The most important thing, however, is that I feel that it will be the same as moving my toes and then the ankle joint, because after two weeks, without pulling the string, I can very slightly contract and relax the tendons under the knees, I feel that the muscles are starting to react, they do what I say"¹⁷. Thanks to these exercises and his great determination regarding success of the treatment, he overcame the effects of the disease. He regained fitness in his legs. When he started to walk, he introduced jumping into his training.

In 1890, he began studies at the newly established Purdue University in Lafayette in the field of engineering and, as befits a student, he decided to join an academic club – the track-and-field team. Initially, they refused to accept him because he limped and was unable to run. Undeterred, he started practicing gymnastics and swimming, until he found the competition – standing jump. At that time, quite specific competitions were performed, which included standing jumps (long, high, triple jump and back jump). The standing jump required a great deal of concentration and jumping characteristics, which Ewry developed during his home exercises. He soon became the best jumper. He was unbeatable in the club. He jumped very high and was called the "human frog". After graduating from university and receiving a mechanical engineering degree, he moved to New York, where he worked as a hydraulic engineer. He enrolled in the famous New York Athletic Club where his sports career began. He dreamed of participating in the Olympics. He trained consistently and won 15 Amateur Athletic Union titles from 1898 to 1910. He became one of the most successful Olympians – athletes in the history of sport.

¹¹ J. Kozielecki, *Koncepcja transgresyjna człowieka. Analiza psychologiczna* [The Transgressional Concept of Man. A Psychological Analysis], Warsaw 1987, p. 175.

¹² J. Reykowski, *Z zagadnień psychologii motywacji* [Eng. From the Issues of Motivational Psychology], Warsaw 1982, p. 185.

¹³ R. Castro, Garrinchia, *Samotna gwiazda* [Eng. Lonely Star], Poznań 2008, p. 2471.

¹⁴ "Venit morbus eques, suevit abire pedes". See. P. K. Tacyt, *Żywot Juliusza Agrykoli* [Eng. The Life Of Julius Agricola], Warsaw 1957, 3, 1.

¹⁵ The level of presentation regarding the heroes is rather modest. It has been narrowed down to only three selected characters and is a small fragment of a larger whole that is in preparation.

¹⁶ T. Olszański, cit., 1976, p. 31.

¹⁷ *Idem*, p. 32.

He won 8 gold medals. At the 1900 Summer Olympics in Paris, he won the standing long jump, standing high jump, standing triple jump competitions. In Saint Louis in 1904, he renewed his success in the same competitions. In London in 1908, he won 2 gold medals in the standing long jump and standing high jump. In 1906, at the Summer Olympics in Athens, he also won 3 gold medals in the standing long and high jump. He was a medal-winner, a man with an interesting biography who was practically forgotten.

After his sports career, he worked as an engineer. During World War 1, he co-designed steam boilers for American warships. He designed a pipeline for New York to supply water from the Catskill Mountain Range. In 1937, he died at the age of 63. He was buried in his hometown. In 1983, he became a part of the United States Olympic Hall Fame¹⁸.

Walt Davis/Buddy Davis, in fact, Walter Francis Davis. He was born on January 5, 1931 in Beaumont. When he was 8, doctors diagnosed him with polio and for the next 7 years, he was confined to a wheelchair. He recalled this difficult time as follows: "Regarding polio, I was only 8 years old, so I was not aware of what was happening. I just knew my mother was upset and I was treated like a king. Part of the torture was that I had to wear these braces on my leg and stay in bed all the time"¹⁹. His hands were weakened and legs completely disabled. It was a difficult time for a child. He was rehabilitated every day and learned how to strengthen his muscles through appropriate exercises. The result of painful and painstaking rehabilitation was the defeat of polio. He was still on crutches, but he did not lose hope. He attended Nederland High School where his interest in sports was revealed. There, Davis became a prominent basketball player and high jumper, scoring over 60 percent of the basketball team's points and winning the district and regional championships in field competitions. He taught fellow Jim Dimmett the form of a jump that Davis turned into the "western roll". The jumper grabs his left foot and puts it under his right hip during take-off, makes a "half dive" over the barbell, curls up and rolls over on his hip, then lands on the sand. Davis believed that he would be successful, because being 203 cm tall and after beating polio, success must come. And it came. He won the high jump with a score of 204 at the Olympic Games in Helsinki. He also played basketball. As a former Olympian, he played for the Philadelphia Warriors, with whom he won the NBA championship in 1956. Playing for the St. Louis Hawks, he won the NBA championship in 1958 and then ended his sports career. He was a celebrity at that time. He served as spokesman for the national Kent cigarette company. He was the deputy sheriff of Jefferson County. He worked in banking for many years. He start-

ed at Groves State Bank, then Wharton and Texarana. When he retired, he did not become idle – he was a civilian employee of the US Coast Guard. He had a successful relationship with his wife Margaret (who died in 2018); a marriage lasting 68 years. Together, they raised 9 children and had "dozens" of grandchildren and great-grandchildren. Davis died on November 17, 2020 in Port Arthur where he was buried for eternal rest²⁰.

Wilma Glodean Rudolph, called the black gazelle, tornado, black pearl, flash, track star, mosquito. She was born on June 23, 1940 in Saint Bethlehem, Tennessee, in a large family, as 20th of the 22 children from her father's – Ed Rudolph's – 2 marriages. She was a premature baby (2.0 kg). Her father was a railroad porter, her mother Blanche worked as a maid. Shortly after Wilma's birth, the family moved to Clarksville. In the 4th year of her life, she developed polio. She also suffered from pneumonia, mumps, scarlet fever and chicken pox. As a result of polio, her left lower limb began to lose mass and became deformed. She was forced to wear a special metal orthosis, which she wore until the age of 12. She recovered, but lost strength in her left leg and foot. To regain fitness, for 2 years, she and her mother travelled every day to a hospital for black Americans in Nashville, 80 km away, for rehabilitation. Additionally, she was massaged by family members at home daily. The massages took place 4 times a day. For 2 years, she wore an orthopaedic shoe that stabilised her foot. Initially, she studied from home (kindergarten and first year of education). Thanks to the efforts of the whole family and her own free will, she learned to walk without a leg stabiliser or orthopaedic shoe. At the age of 8, thanks to the exercises and massages of supported by parents and siblings, she could walk without crutches. Her health improved so much that she began attending Burt African American School in Clarksville from 2nd grade onwards, where she began playing basketball and training running. At 11, she played basketball with her brothers. In the 12th year of her life, she achieved a level of fitness granting full independence. She began to practice track-and-field in 1955. At the Olympic Games in Melbourne (1956) – as a 16-year-old - she won a bronze medal in the 4x400-m relay. In her last year of high school she became pregnant and gave birth to her daughter Yolanda in 1958, just a few weeks before beginning her studies. She studied pedagogy. During her studies, she played sports. The trainings resulted in winning 3 gold medals: in the 100-m, 200-m and the 4x400-m relay race during the 1960 Olympic Games in Rome. As an Olympic champion in the early 1960s, she became one of the most recognisable black women in America and around the world. She has become a role

¹⁸ Ray Ewry, *Team USA, Hall of Flame*, teamusa.org; Ray Ewry <https://eurosport.tvn24.pl>

¹⁹ From interview for "The News" in July 2016, series devoted to Olympians from Port Arthur and Mid-County.

²⁰ Based on I.C. Murrell, Buddy Davis, *Olympic & NBA champ from Nederland, dies at 89*. "The Port Arthur News" 2020 11-17 m.panews.com, United states championship (men 1943); D. Miller, *Historia igrzysk olimpijskich i MKOL. Od Aten do Pekinu 1894-2008* [History of the Olympic Games and IOC. From Athens to Beijing 1894-2008], Poznań 2008, p. 161.

model for many African American women. It was her successes that contributed to raising the level of women's athletics in the United States. In 1962, Wilma Rudolph retired from sport. She graduated from Tennessee State University in 1963. She worked as an educator and coach. The "Black Gazelle" was very active. She worked in many fields. Among others, in 1981 she established a non-profit foundation based in Indianapolis, aimed at training young athletes. She was a sports commentator at the 1984 Olympics in Los Angeles.

She died at the age of 54 on November 12, 1994, in Brentwood. The cause of her death was cancer. The memory of her is still alive. Her image appears on postage stamps and is the subject of numerous publications intended for school children and teenagers²¹.

The profiles of Olympic champions presented in encyclopaedic summaries are people who had experienced serious illness in their childhoods. They lost their motor independence. As it turned out, only temporarily. Thanks to intensive rehabilitation, their motor abilities were restored. These hero-busters exemplify that the impact of a disease is not always only negative. A reminder of these slightly forgotten Olympic heroes shows how complex the mechanisms of the human body are, how various their functioning, and how important a personality that does not succumb to its bodily handicap is, but creates value with the dimensions of an Olympic hero. Thanks to sport, they became heroes, and sport, thanks to these heroes, seems to be richer in personalities, remarkably worth following and giving hope to those doubting their own abilities.

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²¹ Based on: autobiography W. Rudolph, *Wilma: The Story of Wilma Rudolph*, 1977; D. Maraniss, *Rome 1960: The Olympic That Changed the World*, New York 2008; Amy Ruth, *Wilma Rudolph* New York 2000; C. van Vest, *Tennessee Encyclopedia of History & Culture*, Nashville 2007, p. 813; T. Biracree, *Wilma Rudolph Champion Athlete*, New York 1988.

