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The Tennessee State Tigerbelles

Cold Warriors of the Track

Carroll Van West

In the lore of Tennessee sports history, few names are more evocative and lionized than the Tennessee State Tigerbelles, a group of women sprinters who dominated track and field events in the nation and world from the mid-1950s to mid-1980s.¹ Scholarly interest in the impact of the Tigerbelles has multiplied in the twenty-first century, with dissertations and books addressing how these women track and field stars shaped mid-twentieth-century images of African American women, women involved in sports in general, and issues of civil rights and international affairs.²

The story of the Tigerbelles and their significance to American sport and culture must center on the great talent and dedication to excellence of these young women. But as media coverage of their athletic exploits intensified from the early 1950s to the 1960s, the Tigerbelles were swept up in American preoccupation with the role of women in contemporary sport, the impact of race in American sport, and the role that amateur athletes could play as pawns in the propaganda posturings of the United States and the Soviet Union during the Cold War.

Track and field at Tennessee Agricultural and Industrial State College (renamed in 1968 as Tennessee State University) began in the aftermath of Jessie Owens's success at the 1936 Olympics. The college's first women's track team formed in 1943 under the direction of Jessie Abbott, succeeded by Lula Bartley in 1945. Abbott brought with him a commitment to excellence gained at Tuskegee Institute, home to the first nationally dominant African American track and field program. Abbott's Tuskegee model shaped what happened at Tennessee State for the next generation of sport.

In 1946 college president Walter S. Davis aggressively implemented a state mandate to make Tennessee A&I the equivalent of the University of Tennessee in all aspects, including athletics. Tom Harris, formerly of Wilberforce University,

became the men's and women's track coach, training his athletes on a hastily built track around the football field. Tennessee State found success early, with both men and women placing third at the annual black college track and field championships at Tuskegee Institute. Then at the 1948 London Olympics, the program tasted its first international success as Audrey Patterson won a bronze medal in the 200-meter race. The college celebrated her success with a parade on Centennial Boulevard, one of the central avenues in the segregated African American section of Nashville.³

The 1950s witnessed the rapid rise of the Tennessee State program to national and international acclaim and grudging recognition in the Jim Crow South.

Coach Ed Temple proved to be the catalyst. He became the women's track coach in 1950 and established what became known as the Tigerbelles Women's Track Club. At the track club's beginning, Temple recalled a hurried meeting with college president Walter S. Davis, where Davis offered a deal that a recently graduated student could not refuse: "Go to grad school, run the post office, coach women's track—for \$150 a month."⁴

Without any scholarships to offer women athletes—an impediment to recruiting that would not change until the 1970s—Temple used work aid to offer students support. The athletes worked two hours a day somewhere in the college in addition to the demanding practices Temple implemented. Patterning his new program on the established and successful track program at Tuskegee, Temple instituted an Amateur Athletic Union–endorsed summer program to attract top high school talent to train with his college sprinters. The AAU summer program was the key to his recruitment efforts (since he hardly had a travel budget otherwise) and graduates from the summer program produced almost all of his Olympic gold medal winners. Temple designed the summer program to mesh with his goals and training regimens at the college so that the athletes once enrolled at Tennessee State already knew the "Ed Temple way."⁵

Other athletes came to Tennessee State due to rising reputation of Temple as a gifted coach. Mae Faggs, for example, started at Tennessee State in the fall of 1952, after competing as a teenager in both the 1948 and 1952 Olympics. Cynthia Thompson from Jamaica also participated in the 1952 games. At that competition in Helsinki, Finland, Barbara Jones and Faggs both took gold medals, the program's first.⁶

In the 1954–55 track season, Temple's athletes continued their winning ways and received national recognition when Tennessee State freshman Isabelle Daniels defeated her teammate and former Olympian Mae Faggs at the Washington Evening News indoor track meet in the District of Columbia. The *Chicago Defender* reported that the "Tennessee Tigerbelles broke three records and took two trophies, five first and one second place medal before a near capacity crowd."⁷ In October, the Tigerbelles dominated at a meet held at Madison Square Garden

in New York City and won the AAU Women's Championship, an important first since the AAU meet was not segregated and white and black runners competed against one another. The Tigerbelles would dominate AAU competitions for years into the future.⁸

National acclaim turned to international fame during 1956 Olympic-year competitions. As early as January Earl S. Clanton III of the *Chicago Defender* was reporting Ed Temple as a possible coach for the women's track team due to the "scintillating runaway of the Tennessee State club in the national AAU outdoor meet last summer."⁹ That streak continued at the segregated Tuskegee Relays in May when the team took goal medals in each event they entered. The *Chicago Defender* account of the Tuskegee competition, however, also introduced a new theme that would follow the Tigerbelles for years: they were graceful, beautiful women not muscle-bound, unattractive athletes. The reporter described Yvonne Macon, who won the shot put, discus, and baseball throw competitions, as "the shapely 19 year old New York born field eventer."¹⁰

Temple admitted that he wanted attractive women in his program, ones who would prove that women athletes could be feminine and attractive. He remarked: "I had a motto. I said, I don't want oxes, I want foxes. I want nice looking girls" to counteract the assumption women who participated in sports could never be married, or have children, to fulfill the image of a proper American woman who so permeated popular culture in the 1950s. In 2007 Temple elaborated on his "I don't want oxes theme": "A lot of people black and white believed that if girls got muscles they could never have babies. So, playing sports was okay in grade school, but black folks got funny about their daughters playing sports as maturing young women."¹¹ Temple added that he was "absolutely determined to prove to the world that you could be a very feminine young woman and still get the job done on the track."¹²

Eight Tigerbelles competed at the 1956 Olympic qualifying events, and Mae Faggs was part of the US "Goodwill" squad that traveled to Africa. As Tennessee State University historian Bobby L. Lovett has emphasized, the success of the Tigerbelles came from women who "had to unload from cramped car seats and perform against college teams that had scholarships, hot food, and first-rate travel and housing."¹³

In interviews, Temple also has discussed not only challenges posed by Jim Crow laws and ethos of the 1950s but the resistance of the men who administered the college's athletic programs. He felt that administrators were jealous of the rapid success of the Tigerbelles in national and international competition, a benchmark of success that the mainstream men teams at Tennessee A&I struggle to match in the 1950s.¹⁴

The crumbling but still stout walls of Jim Crow did not stand in the way of the six Tigerbelles who competed at the Melbourne Olympics during the summer of

1956. Four Tigerbelles, including Isabelle Daniels, Mae Faggs, Margaret Matthews, and the high school junior Wilma Rudolph, composed the 4 x 100 relay team and took the bronze medal while another high school star competing with the Tigerbelles, Willye B. White, won the silver in the long jump. Temple, however, was not chosen as an American coach and did not make the trip; he charged veteran Olympian Mae Faggs to take the six Tigerbelles to Australia. Fagg, insisted Temple, “was the spitfire. I mean, she put the fire in ’em.”¹⁵ Despite Temple’s absence, the women acquitted themselves with honor both on the track and within the Olympic Village, where they could freely mix with their white teammates and athletes from around the world. After the Olympics, the State Department chose Faggs to be the single woman member of a US track and field squad that traveled to Africa as part of its effort at cultural diplomacy in addressing “the growth of nationalism in Africa.”¹⁶

The Tigerbelles continued as Cold War ambassadors for the United States during trips in 1957 to Cuba and then in 1958 to the Soviet Union as officials searched for people of color to represent the flag in a suddenly more diverse world. The Soviet threat in athletic competitions was both on the track and in the press room. American officials wanted to win, and to show that American women were ladies, as part of the larger cultural campaign to prove the superiority of the United States over the communist system of Soviet Russia. Not wanting to be embarrassed at the forthcoming Olympic games in Rome, US track and field officials began to seriously consider a role for Ed Temple on the national squad. When the 1958 event did not end well for the United States, a reporter in the *Washington Post and Times Herald* asked, “Where are the Babe Didricksons and Stella Walshes of yesteryear?” The reporter provided Ed Temple’s answer: “We have the material but we don’t give it a chance to develop. Our women just need more opportunity.” Temple backed up his observation by pointing out his Tigerbelles won all sprint races because “the sprinters had proper training.”¹⁷ At the Chicago-hosted Pan American Games in 1959, Tigerbelles won twelve events, further solidifying their program as the nation’s best for women’s track and field.¹⁸

The nascent civil rights movement framed the success of the Tigerbelles in the 1950s. When these women toured the free world and behind the Iron Curtain, they enjoyed freedoms unavailable in the Jim Crow South, especially Nashville, where groups like the White Citizens Council held sway. Parades and on-campus celebrations of the Tigerbelles could happen in the African American section of the city, but the rest of Nashville, including its sports pages, paid little attention, at least until the bronze medal success at the Melbourne Games in 1956. After that the *Nashville Tennessean* assigned one of its cub reporters, David Halberstam, to write a story about the Tigerbelles. Willye White recalled: “The Olympic games introduced me to the real world. Before my first Olympics, I thought the whole

world consisted of cross burnings and lynchings. After 1956 I found there were two worlds, Mississippi and the rest of the world.”¹⁹

The 1960 Olympics in Rome became a focus for every training session and meet that the Tigerbelles accepted that year. Temple had his most talented athletes ever, and the team dominated all national competitions, winning its fourth consecutive AAU national title at the April competitions in Akron, Ohio.²⁰ In July, the Tigerbelles dominated track events at the Olympic trials in Abilene, Texas, as they also endured the pervasive racism of Texas. The women almost missed one race because the driver refused the assignment; a hurried replacement got the team to the competition just in time. After the trials, the US Olympic committee named Ed Temple as the women’s track and field coach for what commentators around the globe considered a showdown Olympics between the two superpowers, the United States and the Soviet Union.²¹

As Temple prepared his national team for the September Olympics, the backdrop of the Cold War loomed ever larger, what author David Maraniss called “one of the hottest summers of the cold war.”²² The backdrop of racial expectations also hindered the preparation of his team, especially the Tigerbelles. The lack of mainstream media coverage meant that few in the American press, along with their European counterparts, thought the US team would be a force in women’s track and field. Olympic officials seeded some athletes, such as Wilma Rudolph, lower than expected in preliminary heats because they would not believe the recorded times that Coach Temple reported.

Once the races began, however, the Tigerbelles roared past most competitors, a storyline even reported in depth in the college’s hometown of Nashville by renowned *Nashville Banner* reporter Fred Russell.²³ Barbara Jones took an individual bronze while teaming with Martha Hudson, Wilma Rudolph, and Lucinda Williams on the 400-meter relay team that won the gold medal, setting a new world record time. Wilma Rudolph, a native of Clarksville, Tennessee, won three gold medals and became an international sports celebrity.²⁴ The *New York Times*, for instance, profiled her after her wins in the 100- and 200-meter sprints, calling her “This queen of the 1960s” who was “a slender beauty whose eyes carry a perpetual twinkle, as if she were amused, and a little puzzled, at what is going on around her.”²⁵ Three days later, with a photograph from the competition along with an individual photo, the *Times* picked up on its theme with the article, “World Speed Queen.” It also called Tennessee State “the cathedral of women’s track in this country,” with Coach Ed “Temple the high priest.”²⁶

The print media was one thing; the unprecedented coverage that the 1960 games had on American television was another. Images of the Tigerbelles in their red, white, and blue USA uniforms (regrettably shown only in black-and-white film) arrived in prime time in American living rooms, courtesy of CBS’s

commitment to twenty hours of coverage. The image of these African American stars must have been startling since the networks at that time still kept African Americans by in large off the television screens.²⁷

Television made the American winners national heroes. From this lofty international stage, Temple and the Tigerbelles began to tour other European locales, beginning in Athens, Greece, where the media played up the look of Rudolph as much as her achievements. At the Empire Games in London, the Tigerbelles again dazzled the crowds and media with their speed and grace. An infatuation with Rudolph began there that has never really ended. When the *Guardian* prepared a special blog on the most stunning Olympic moments as part of its coverage of the 2012 London Olympics, it chose Rudolph's 1960 performance at Rome as #35 of 50. And the writer observed that the Olympic achievement made Rudolph an international star: "The Italians called her La Gazzella Negra (the Black Gazelle) the French La Perle Noire (the Black Pearl) and the English, where she won the 100m dash at an invitational, the Tennessee Tornado."²⁸

Back in the States by the end of the month, the Tigerbelles, with Rudolph garnering the most press, toured New York City, Detroit, and Chicago before a triumphant return to Nashville, where Mayor Ben West presented the team with a congratulatory proclamation—this event occurring in the same calendar year that sit-in demonstrations had rocked downtown businesses.²⁹ In her hometown of Clarksville, Tennessee, Rudolph presided over a huge community celebration, which became, at her insistence, the first integrated public event in the city since Reconstruction.³⁰

Success bred more competition for the Tigerbelles in the 1961 track season. It began with the late January announcement that Rudolph was the recipient of the annual Associated Press designation of "Women Athlete of the Year." The following month, Tennessee A&I stars were the featured attraction at the inaugural Mason-Dixon games in Louisville, Kentucky. The team was now considered one of the greatest in all sports, and ever-growing crowds wanted to see the women run, while corporate sponsors lined up to be associated with these athletes. In April 1961, the All-American Homemaker of Tomorrow banquet at the snazzy Statler-Hilton Hotel in Washington, DC, hosted both white Miss America Nancy Anne Fleming and Wilma Rudolph as its honored guests. General Mills corporation gave Tennessee A&I a \$1,000 scholarship in Rudolph's name. The attention, Ed Temple admitted to a reporter covering the event, was "more than we imagined."³¹ Rudolph also met with President John F. Kennedy and Vice President Lyndon B. Johnson at the White House's Oval Office during that visit to DC. The leaders of the free world embraced the opportunity for a photo opportunity with the internationally famous Olympian, her mother, Blanche Rudolph, and Coach Ed Temple.³²

Through it all Temple marveled at Rudolph's charisma: "Here's a person so great, but still so feminine, looks so nice, has a smile—she had everything." He

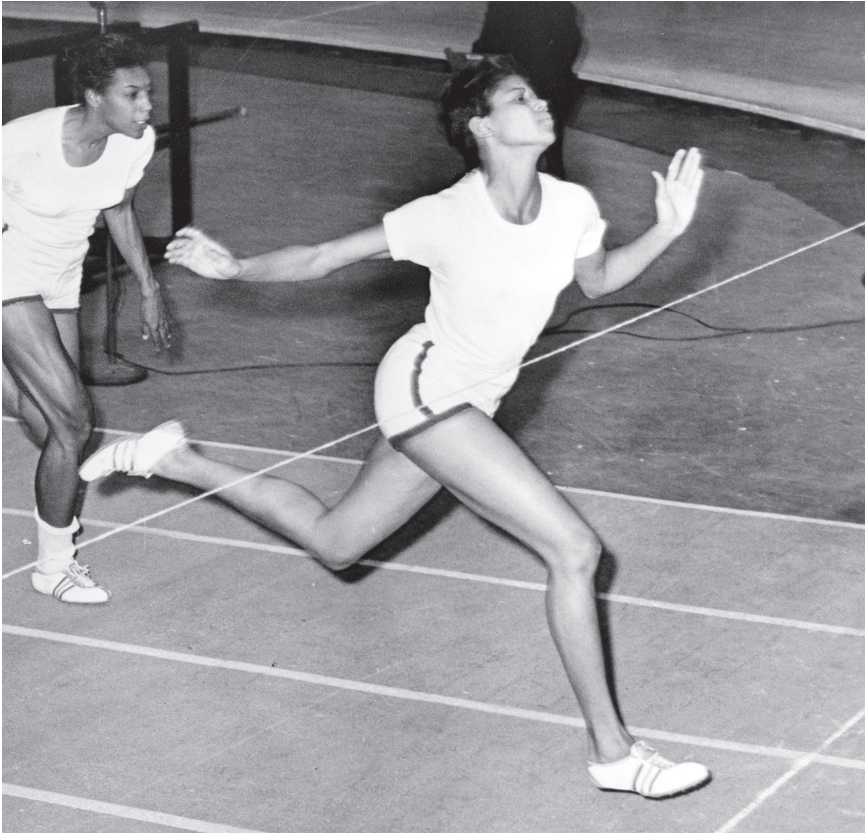
told one scholar: “She would be the same person walking down Jefferson Street [in Nashville] or in Clarksville as she would meeting President Kennedy, or kings and queens, or ambassadors, or anything else.” Here, Temple believed, is the reason why Rudolph “opened up the doors for women’s sports period. I ain’t talking just about track and field.”³³

Naturally the acclaim directed at Rudolph distracted then disappointed some of her Tigerbelle teammates. Certainly they understood that Rudolph’s inspirational story of becoming a track star after having polio and wearing braces and special shoes until she was almost a teenager, and she did win all of the races. But they also knew the image was carefully managed—no one knew or at least acknowledged that Rudolph was a mother, already having a daughter named Yolanda, whom her parents cared for. In 1961 she married William Ward and was acknowledged as Wilma Rudolph Ward when she received the prestigious Sullivan Award for amateur athletic excellence in early 1962. By 1963 Rudolph had divorced Ward and married Yolanda’s father, Robert Eldridge.³⁴

Media coverage of Rudolph’s brilliance dwarfed that of the Tigerbelles until Rudolph stopped competitive track and field in the summer of 1962. In one final meet against the Soviet Union’s best at Palo Alto, California, Rudolph and other Tigerbelles defeated their Soviet rivals, leading a reporter from *Sports Illustrated* to write: that it was “the best track meet of the year, but also was the prettiest. Soviet women athletes have always seemed more attractive than Soviet women clerks or housewives, and now the Americans are catching up in this new respect as well as in the events on the field.”³⁵

Once competitive track was over, Rudolph hit the exhibition circuit. The US Information Service, one of the nation’s Cold War propaganda arms, sponsored a trip to Ghana and Senegal in 1963. Tigerbelles continued to carry the torch, as columnist A. S. “Doc” Young observed, in annual competitions with women teams from the Soviet Union. Young wrote that the thought that competitive athletics were somehow improper for young women was passing as was the day that Soviet athletes routinely dominated American women. He gave credit where credit was due, first to Tuskegee Institute and then to the Tigerbelles, especially Rudolph. Young wrote that Rudolph “was probably the first Negro girl athlete to be described as being ‘beautiful’ in the general-circulating daily press. She proved that a girl didn’t require a face by Frankenstein to qualify for the world of track and field.”³⁶

The Tigerbelles image only improved with the team’s results in the 1964 Olympics in Tokyo, where Wyomia Tyus took gold and silver medals and Edith McGuire won one gold and two silver medals. US Olympic officials finally relented to the obvious and in 1967 named Temple as the coach for both the men’s and women’s teams. Then in the 1968 Mexico City Olympics Tyus took two more gold medals and Madeline Manning took another. Coach Temple later told Jennifer



Wilma Rudolph at the finish line during the 50-yard dash at a track meet in Madison Square Garden, 1961. *Image courtesy of Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, NYWT&S Collection [LC-USZ62-115646].*

Lansbury that he felt Wyomia Tyus's achievements had been neglected, in large part because she was quiet and lacked the charisma of Rudolph. "People don't realize. Tyus did more great things than Wilma on the track. Wilma won 3 gold and a bronze. Tyus won 3 gold and a silver," Temple observed, and then emphasized, "Tyus was the first person, man or woman, to repeat in the sprints. Jesse Owens didn't repeat, Wilma didn't repeat. Tyus was the first person."³⁷

Nor was the team's image damaged by the controversial protest by US men sprinters John Carlos and Tommie Smith at the Mexico City Olympics. After receiving their medals, Carlos and Smith raised clenched fists in a Black Power salute as the national anthem played over the loudspeakers. Their silent protest

sparked a national outcry: track stars were to enhance the US international image, not burnish it. The six Tigerbelles who participated in the games did not join the protests, but Wyomia Tyus said she would give her medals to the two male sprinters if the Olympic team stripped them of the honors they had earned. The Tigerbelles' lack of civil rights activism did not mean that they were only sports figures and took no notice of the turmoil that swirled around them in the 1960s American South. Lucinda Williams remarked: "Look we had all experienced racism. Most of us came from the segregated South. We knew what it was like . . . we also knew why we had bag lunches and had to go to the bathroom in the fields when we traveled. At the end of the day we knew Mr. Temple had it right, we needed to get our degrees, compete hard, and be young ladies, we were going to get equality through our hard work."³⁸

Racism was not the only barrier in the 1950s and 1960s; gender expectations and sexism were constant challenges. In interviews with historians Lansbury and Salisbury, Ed Temple consistently expressed his frustration with college administrators who always favored men's teams, no matter the international success of his program. He understood the South was football country but the achievements of the Tigerbelles were extraordinary. Temple told Lansbury that it really made him mad that after the success of 1960—and the national tour of his tired track stars that brought unprecedented positive publicity to the Tennessee A&I—college administrators still refused to provide scholarships to the women athletes.

The sexism of the age is most glaring today. It was more than the college administrators and the sports writers cited earlier—it extended to Olympic officials and even male teammates at TSU and on the Olympic team where male athletes would harass their female teammates and keep training equipment out of their reach. Even as the 1968 team dominated the AAU National Championships, a newspaper account called the women the "Tennessee Cindercuties."³⁹ As the work of Sara M. Evans and other scholars have shown over the past generation, those who advocated civil rights for African Americans often struggled with extending those same rights and considerations to African American women.⁴⁰

The Olympic fortunes of the Tigerbelles changed in the 1970s. As more and more university systems across the South integrated, some track stars went to better funded formerly all-white universities. Also the congressional approval of Title IX of the federal Education Amendments of 1972 led more universities to invest new or enhanced funds into women's sports, furthering accelerating that process. Then in the South particularly state legislatures cut funding for formerly all-black public colleges and universities, claiming that such designated funding was no longer necessary. Despite the challenges, Temple's Tigerbelles still remained a power. Madeline Manning took a silver at the 1972 Munich Games and Kathy McMillan also won a silver medal at the 1976 Montreal Olympics. Then a promising team

for the 1980 Moscow Games, with Mims, McMillan, and newcomers Brenda Morehead and Chandra Cheeseborough, lost their chance at international fame when the United States decided to boycott the games in protest of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan.⁴¹

The 1984 Olympics at Los Angeles, however, became a platform for another remarkable Tigerbelle performance as Chandra Cheeseborough won two gold medals along with a silver medal. Times had changed, however; Cheeseborough never received the international or national acclaim afforded earlier Tigerbelle stars as Mae Faggs, Wilma Rudolph, and Wyomia Tyus. The Cold War was at a far different place that year. The Soviet Block boycotted the Los Angeles games, in reaction to the previous American boycott of the Moscow Olympics four years earlier. Many commentators felt that the winners had not faced the best competition, and slighted the athletes' achievements, even when medalists like Cheeseborough had set new national records in their recorded times.⁴²

For over thirty years, the Tigerbellees had been standard setters for women track and field programs in the United States. Ed Temple orchestrated that achievement by recruiting, training, and retaining the best athletes he could find. His teams of the 1980s and early 1990s were skilled and competitive but no longer dominated on the international stage. Temple retired in 1993—with over forty years of shaping a legacy that even in the twenty-first century equates the word Tigerbellees with athletic excellence. His teams won a staggering thirty-four national titles, along with thirty-one Olympic medals. His successor as Tigerbellees coach was his last great sprinter, Chandra Cheeseborough. TSU historian Bobby L. Lovett observes: “no other institution in Tennessee had come close to matching these achievements.”⁴³

Cheeseborough continued the “Temple way,” with her own modifications as TSU track coach into the 1990s. Wilma Rudolph, however, died from cancer a year after her coach's retirement. Obituaries from across the country emphasized not only her achievements at the 1960 Rome Olympics but her post-track career as a teacher, an inspirational speaker, and a role model. In the *New York Times*, Ira Berkow called Rudolph, “America's black Cinderella.”⁴⁴ LeRoy Walker, then president of the US Olympic Committee, called Rudolph “one of the greatest sprinters of all time.”⁴⁵

Mae Faggs received similar praise after she too died of cancer in 2000. Recognized as the “mother” of the Tigerbelle tradition, Faggs later took an MA from the University of Cincinnati and then coached track and tougher physical education at various Cincinnati-area high schools.⁴⁶

Indeed, most of the Tigerbellees found success outside of the world of TSU track and field. Some, like Wyomia Tyus, stayed close. Tyus raced professionally in the 1970s, served as an expert commentator at the 1972 Munich Games for ABC-TV, was a founder of the Women's Sport Foundation, and then taught and coached track at schools from the elementary to high school levels.⁴⁷

Tyus's good friend and competitor, Edith McGuire Duvall, quickly retired from competitive track and field and became a schoolteacher and coach. But then she took up a second career as owner of several McDonald's restaurant franchises. Big Macs made her a rich woman, and she and her husband gave TSU \$1 million, half of which they designated for the Charles and Edith Duvall Endowment for Excellence in Women's Track at TSU. The endowment gives TSU athletes a better chance to compete against major college track and field programs, providing funding that Ed Temple only dreamed of.⁴⁸

One wonders, in this far different world of collegiate athletics of the twenty-first century, if any track and field program will ever match the excellence, or the cultural impact, of the Tigerbelles Women's Track Club of Tennessee State University. TSU officials in 2004 dedicated an Olympic Plaza, completed with a four-story-tall sculpture dedicated to the university's many Olympians. The plaza is a daily reminder of a four-decade-long legacy of excellence established by a coach and a group of dedicated women athletes. Twenty years after Temple's retirement as Tigerbelles coach, Nashville *Tennessean* writer Dwight Lewis remarked: "If there's anybody in America who has ever achieved success at the highest level in the area of track and field, it is Temple. His Tennessee State Tigerbelles opened the door for women, not only in track and field, but in all sports."⁴⁹ That is why the story of the Tigerbelles will continue to burn brightly in the history of college sports well into the twenty-first century.