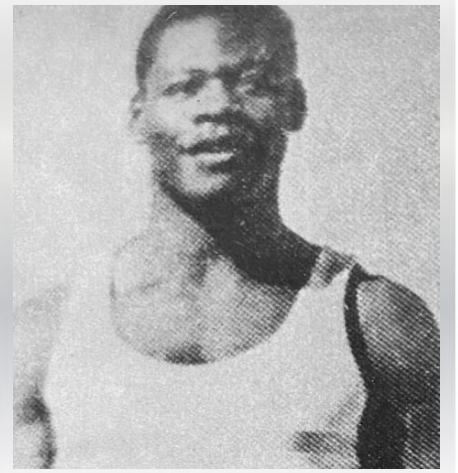
First Citizens Sports Foundation

HALL OF FAME



Rodney Wilkes

H.B.M

Weightlifting

Inducted in 1985

Trinidad and Tobago's first ever Olympic medalist – that would be reason enough for Rodney Wilkes' induction to the Hall of Fame. But, for the weightlifter known as 'Willie', there were other medals to be won in other competitions, and Willie obliged. Central American & Caribbean (CAC) Games, Pan Am Games, Commonwealth Games: this remarkable athlete represented Trinidad and Tobago with aplomb in each of these games and returned home with medals to create a fabulous record in the annals of Trinbagonian sport.

Wilkes believed that his great strength was developed in part by his carrying large grass bundles to feed his father's donkeys in San Fernando during his youth. In those early years he displayed a good turn of speed, which he used on the football pitch as well as the athletic track. As a teenager, he came across fellow teenagers posing on the beach and, seeing the results of their weightlifting, he became interested.

Invited to join a gym, he met Leo Taylor, a strict disciplinarian who was the perfect coach to instill the regime – inside and outside of the gym walls – necessary for success.

By 17 years old, Wilkes was the national Featherweight champion. The marriage of natural talent and hard work was reaping rewards as he was winning across the nation in the many weekend competitions that existed at the time. As a national champion, and displaying remarkable consistency in his sport, he was a natural choice when the first post-war competition, the 1946 CAC Games, took place. In Barranquilla, Colombia, Wilkes obliterated the competition to take a comfortable gold medal – one of four that Trinidad and Tobago won.

In 1947 he travelled to Philadelphia for the world championships, where he experienced his first failure and finished outside of the medals. There were accusations that he was overweight, not in peak condition. Despite the setback, his CAC gold put him in a good position to be one of the five athletes that a cash-strapped Trinidad and Tobago would send to London for the 1948 Olympics.

There, Lionel Seemungal was appointed his manager, and both athlete and manager formed a winning relationship based on honesty, logic and psychology. Seemungal had Wilkes start with his lowest weight and build up progressively over the sequence of his three lifts in each category: the press, the snatch and the clean & jerk.

As if to prove that he was ready, Wilkes engaged in a little psychology of his own. At the weigh-in, he told the American Kotaro Ishikawa, “Rodney

Wilkes is going to clip your head tonight." It caused a minor uproar from the American camp, but Seemungal was able to diffuse it and keep the focus on the competition itself. He refused to try to match the weight of the Egyptian lifter, Mahmoud Fayad, in the clean & jerk, aware that Fayad was better in that discipline and not wanting to risk Wilkes failing at any of his nine attempts. Rodney's gradual build up plan yielded 214.5lbs in the press, 214.5lbs in the snatch, 269.5lbs in the clean & jerk. His total of 698.5lbs was more than enough for second place on the podium, and Trinidad and Tobago had its first ever Olympic medal, in its first ever participation.

With the experience of a medal on the greatest stage of them all, Wilkes was now ready for anything that the competition could throw at him. He returned to the stage of his first international triumph, the CAC Games, and ran away with gold in Guatemala. In Buenos Aires for the 1951 Pan Am Games he totaled 715lbs to win the gold medal. It was 55lbs more than the silver medalist, and 88lbs more than the bronze medalist. Wilkes was at the top of his game, with another Olympics to come.

For the Pan Am Games, Argentinian Premier Juan Peron provided the travel for Trinidad and Tobago's athletes. For Helsinki in 1952 Trinidad and Tobago would have to foot the bill. It meant that there was such uncertainty about sending a team that Wilkes and fellow lifter Lennox Kilgour only knew that they were on the flight a few hours before departing. There was hardly any preparation time, hardly any acclimatization, before entering the cauldron of competition. On the day, Wilkes lifted a total of 709lbs, way below the two Russians that finished ahead of him, but sufficient to gain the bronze medal. He had earned a second medal at his second Olympics, and with Kilgour's bronze

in the Heavyweight division Trinidad and Tobago achieved a 100% return for the two-man team that had been sent to the Games.

Uncertainty was the issue with travel to Helsinki, but in 1954 it was the travel itself that was the main problem. With limited funds available, Trinidad and Tobago sent its team to the Commonwealth Games in Vancouver via a bauxite ship to Quebec, then by a cross country train from eastern to western Canada. Wilkes trained on the ship, assembling a 140lbs barbell for the duration of the trip on the sea, before being able to train in the home of a Canadian immigration officer who looked after him during their four-day wait in Quebec. This would all prove invaluable come competition day in Vancouver.

Wilkes' press was 200lbs, the snatch 215lbs, the clean & jerk 275lbs. While it was enough for the gold, he was disappointed with his total of 690lbs, especially in a sport where personal bests matter a great deal.

A back injury whilst training meant that he was not available for the 1955 Pan Am Games, so he concentrated on his third Olympics, being held in Melbourne in 1956. Like many sports, the ante was upped since the last edition, with Wilkes' competition lifting as much as 40lbs more than four years previously. Readying himself in Trinidad, he was now pressing 225lbs regularly with the aim of attaining a total of at least 735lbs in Melbourne. In the event, he lifted a total of 725lbs, his highest ever in international competition, but his personal best left him 11lbs short of the bronze medal position.

Wilkes returned to the Commonwealth Games held in Cardiff, Wales, in 1958 and ever the bankable athlete, returned home with a bronze

medal. At 33 years old, he retired from international competition. He worked as an electrician, remaining in his beloved San Fernando.

His medal haul across all major games is his almost incomparable legacy. The nation honored one of its greatest athletes with the Hummingbird Gold Medal in 1972 and in 1985, Rodney Wilkes was inducted into the Trinidad and Tobago Sports Hall of Fame.

CAC Games:	**1946 Gold Featherweight** **1950 Gold Featherweight**
Olympic Games:	**1948 Silver Featherweight** **1952 Bronze Featherweight**
Pan American Games:	**1951 Gold Featherweight**
Commonwealth Games:	**1954 Gold Featherweight** **1958 Bronze Featherweight**

