

SNEAK PEEK!



SIMONE BILES

MEGAN RAPINOE



MICHAEL PHELPS

SERENA WILLIAMS



★ ★ ★ **KID** ★ ★ ★  
**OLYMPIANS**

★ ★ ★ **SUMMER** ★ ★ ★

TRUE TALES OF CHILDHOOD FROM CHAMPIONS AND GAME CHANGERS

STORIES BY *ROBIN STEVENSON* ILLUSTRATIONS BY *ALLISON STEINFELD*



USAIN BOLT



IBTIHAJ MUHAMMAD



DICK FOSBURY



TATYANA MCFADDEN

# Usain Bolt

The Fastest Kid  
in Jamaica

**U**sain Bolt may be the fastest runner ever. An eight-time Olympic gold medalist, he holds the world records for the 100- and 200-meter sprints—but as a twelve-year-old, he used to skip practices to play *Mario Kart* at the local arcade!

**Usain Bolt was born** on August 21, 1986, in Jamaica. His home was in a small village in a sunny valley within Trelawny Parish. His father, Wellesley, had two other kids—Usain’s younger brother, Sadiki, and his older sister, Christine. Usain’s mom was named Jennifer and he was her only child.



Even as an infant, Usain was full of energy. Once he learned to crawl, he was unstoppable: he wanted to go everywhere and climb everything! “I wouldn’t sit still; I couldn’t stand in one place for longer than a second,” he said. Finally, his exhausted parents took him to the doctor. The doctor said that Usain was hyperactive but that he would outgrow it eventually.

Living in a farming community, Usain grew up

eating lots of fresh food like yams, bananas, oranges, coconut, mangoes, berries, and guava. “Everything grew in and around the backyard,” he recalled. “If my stomach rumbled I would find a tree and pick fruits.” The forests around his home made a wonderful playground for an active kid.



When he was five or six, Usain discovered the sport of cricket. He and his friends played on the street, sometimes even making their own balls from rubber bands or old string. For a wicket, they used wood from banana trees, piles of stones, or cardboard. Cricket was popular at school too; Usain attended Waldensia Primary in the nearby town of Sherwood Content. Usain’s dad, who was loving but also very strict,

insisted that Usain say good morning to every single adult he saw on his way to school.



Usain was a polite and confident boy who made friends easily. One of them, Nugent Walker Junior, lived close by and the two boys became best friends. Nugent's nickname was NJ, and for a while, people started calling Usain VJ. He wasn't sure why, but he liked it—partly because he was tired of people pronouncing Usain incorrectly!

Usain did well in school in the early years. He had a competitive streak and was determined to solve math problems faster than NJ. "I loved to compete," he said. "And I really hated losing." But his real passion was for sports. He was fast, and he had the advantage of being

taller than most kids his age. Despite being younger than most of the players on his school cricket team, he was soon batting for the squad.

When he was eight, one of his teachers, Mr. Nugent, noticed what a fast runner Usain was. Usain didn't think he was all that fast, because there was another kid, Ricardo, who always beat him. So he shrugged off his teacher's suggestion that he try running—until Mr. Nugent bribed him with the offer of a special lunch if he could outrun Ricardo in the 100-meter race at school sports day. Jerk chicken, potatoes, rice, and peas? That sounded good to Usain.



All the students came out to watch the big race. On the sports field, a running track had been made by

scorching the grass with burning gasoline to create black lines between the lanes. Usain was nervous—but determined to win. By the time he reached the finish line, he was a long way ahead of Ricardo. He was the fastest kid at his school, and he felt great.

After that, Usain started competing with kids from other schools. His house was filling up with medals and trophies! In Jamaica, track and field was hugely important—much like football and basketball at many schools in the United States. William Knibbs School, a short drive away, had a strong reputation for athletics. One of the former students had even run at the Olympics! When the principal saw Usain run, he offered him a scholarship, and so, at age eleven, Usain began attending school at William Knibbs.

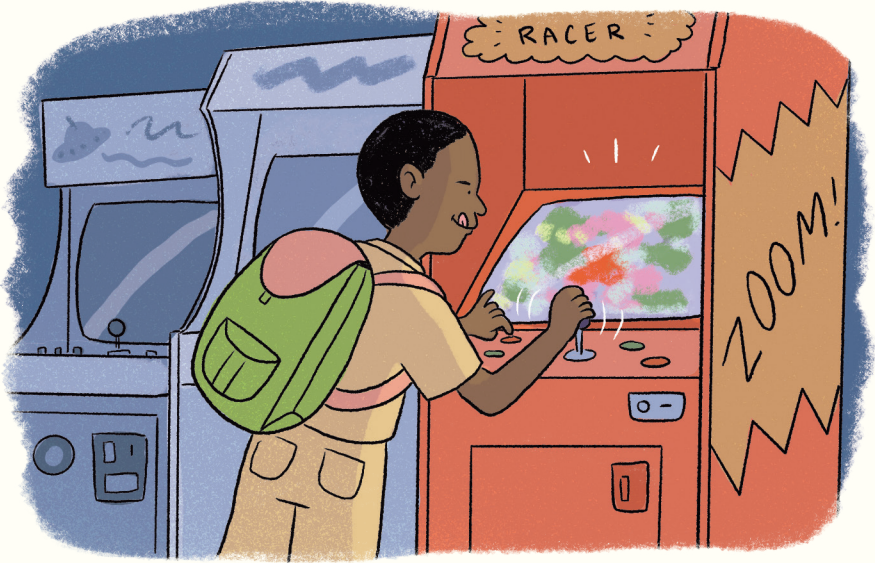


Usain's parents were happy; they wanted their son to have every opportunity, but they couldn't have afforded expensive school fees. To Usain's shock, his new school wouldn't let him play cricket. They wanted him to focus on running. Usain was disappointed, but his dad pointed out that in some ways, running might be better than a team sport: "in track and field you're the boss of yourself," he told his son.

Usain tried various races, from short sprints to longer distances. He was tall for the 100 meters—it took him too long to get his body upright coming out of the starting blocks—and long-distance running was too much work. The 200- and 400-meter races seemed just right, taking advantage of his long stride, his speed, and his stamina. At those distances, Usain was so fast, his coaches could hardly believe it.

In fact, he had so much natural talent that winning races wasn't difficult for him at all—and that, in a way, created its own problems! Because he didn't have to train hard to win, his technique was sloppy. "If I'd flapped my arms a bit more, I probably would have taken flight," he admitted. He started skipping evening practices and heading to the local arcade instead. Using the coins his mom gave him to buy lunch, he'd play *Mario Kart* and *Mortal Kombat* for hours. "Most evenings my hands would hurt from the joystick because I'd played for too long," he said.





Usain wasn't very motivated in the classroom either. His father was worried. If Usain failed a year, he'd have to repeat it, and that would cost money. Besides, Usain's dad pointed out, a career as a runner might not work out. Usain needed an education to fall back on.

Determined to tackle what he saw as his son's laziness, he began waking Usain up at 5:30 every morning. But after his dad left for work, Usain's mom let him go back to sleep until the last possible minute—and then called him a cab so that he wouldn't be late to school.

Eventually, Usain encountered a runner who was faster than him. At the Regional Championships, known as Champs, a boy called Keith Spence beat him repeatedly. Usain didn't like that at all. Vowing to win his next race, he began training more seriously—and he

saw a video that changed everything. It was footage of the 1996 Olympic Games in Atlanta, where Michael Johnson won gold medals in both the 200- and 400-meter races. *I want to be an Olympic gold medalist*, Usain thought as he watched.



Michael Johnson ran with an unusual upright posture and Usain was fascinated. He began watching videos of other great Jamaican athletes such as Herb McKenley, Arthur Wint, and Don Quarrie, and he realized that he had a lot to learn. He practiced his corners, keeping closer to the inside of the track, and worked to improve his running technique.

At the next Regional Championships, Usain was determined to beat his rival. When the starting gun

fired, Keith flew out of the blocks ahead of Usain—but once Usain hit his stride, he powered past him, crossing the finish line with a huge lead. Victory!

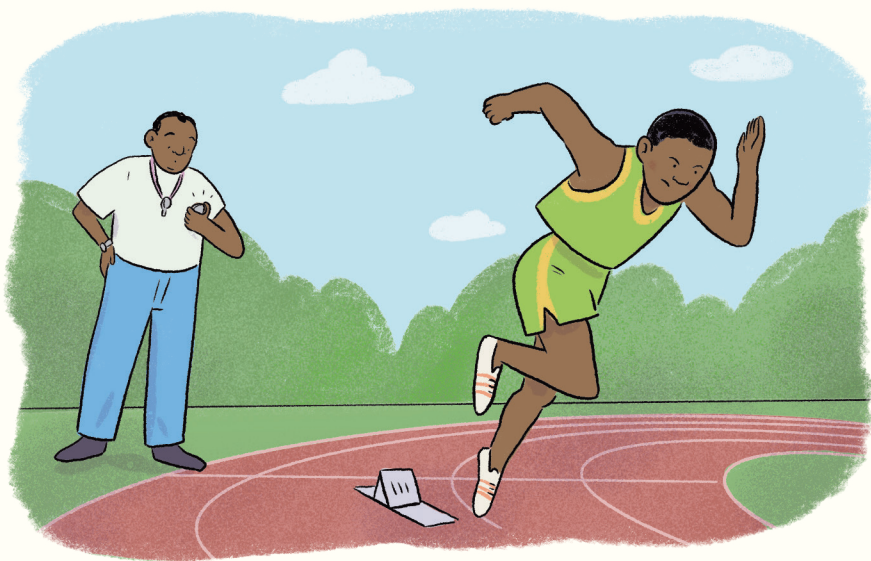
The win gave Usain the chance to represent his country at the 2001 CARIFTA Games, a Caribbean-wide competition held in Barbados. It was his first time leaving Jamaica, and he was homesick—but soon he was traveling again, to an international youth championship in Hungary. Usain found it very cold and thought the food was weird, but strangest of all was the bottled water. He'd never encountered fizzy water before!



A year later, Usain broke several CARIFTA records, earning the nickname Lighting Bolt. The World Juniors were held in Kingston, Jamaica, that year, and the huge

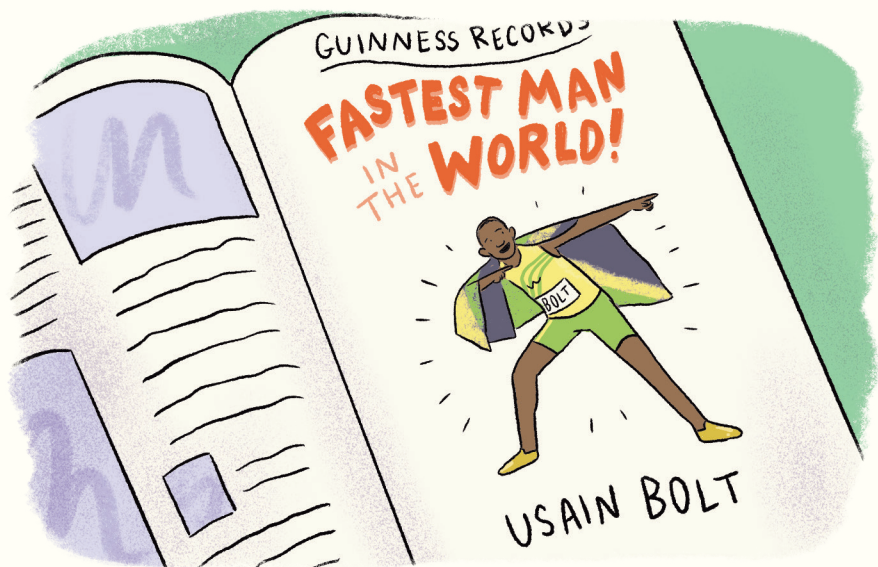
crowd made Usain so nervous that he almost put his shoes on the wrong feet! Despite his fears—and despite being only fifteen, several years younger than his competitors—he won the men’s 200 meters.

At seventeen, Usain moved to Kingston to train full-time. It was a difficult year: Usain was injured, and then he learned that he had scoliosis, a curvature of the spine. He did badly in some races, and the media criticized him for going to parties and eating fast food. But Usain didn’t quit. He found a new coach and trained hard, and by the time he was twenty, he was winning international competitions.



People had always told Usain he was too tall to be a sprinter, but he was about to prove them all wrong. He

persuaded his coach to let him try the shorter 100-meter races as well as the 200-meters—and in 2008, he won his first Olympic gold medals in Beijing, China. Four years later, he won three more golds (in the 100- and 200-meter sprints and the 4x100 relay) at the Olympics in London—and earned a Guinness World Record as the first athlete to win the 100- and 200-meter sprint at two Olympics in a row! Four years later, in 2016, he did it again, winning gold in all three events at the Olympic Games in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil.



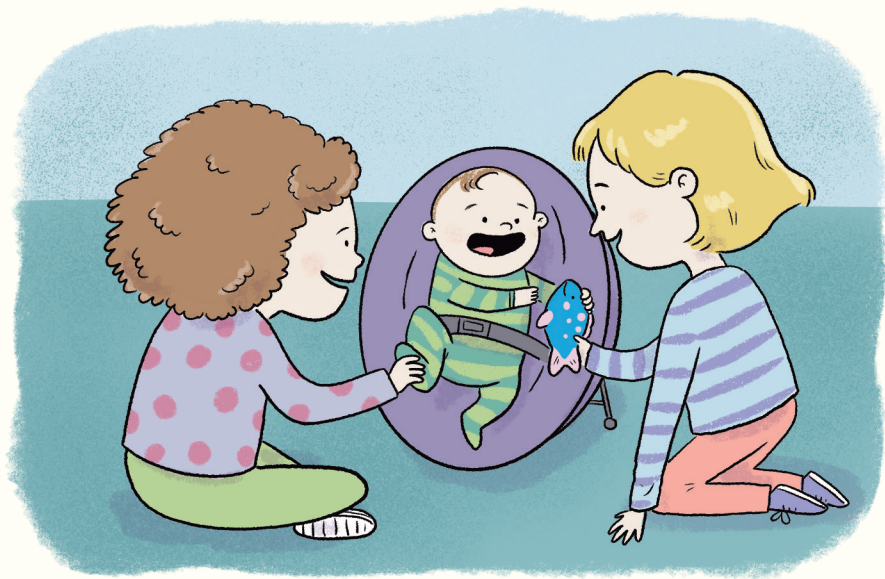
An eleven-time world champion, Usain Bolt is considered the greatest sprinter of all time.

# Michael Phelps

*The Boy Who  
Couldn't Sit Still*

**S**ometimes known as the Flying Fish, Michael Phelps is the most successful Olympian ever: he has won a record-breaking twenty-eight Olympic medals! At his first swimming lesson, however, he didn't even want to get his face wet.

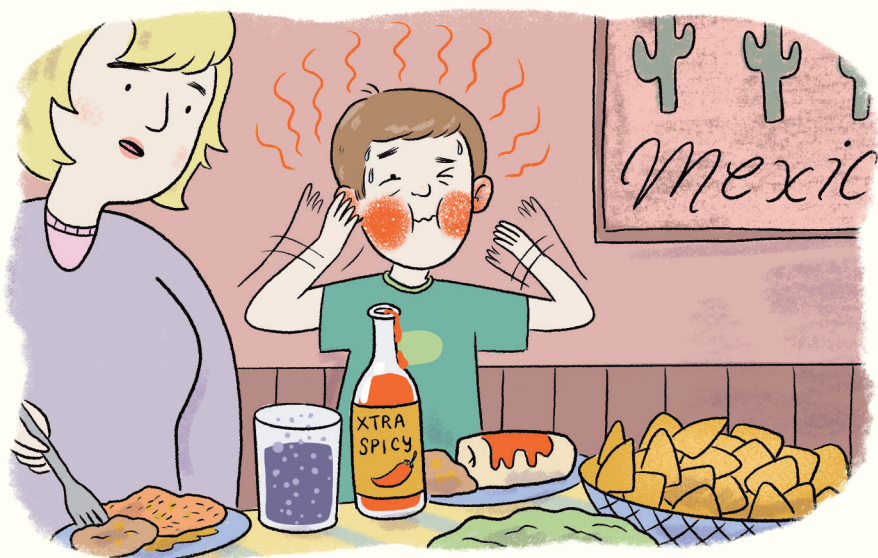
**Michael Phelps was born** on June 30, 1985, in Baltimore and raised in the nearby suburb of Towson. His mom, Deborah Sue (or Debbie), was a home economics teacher and his dad, Michael Fred Phelps, was a Maryland state trooper. Michael was the baby of the family. His older sisters, Hilary and Whitney, were seven and five years old when he came along.



Right from the start, Michael was a high-energy kid who got into everything. “Whatever it was, if it was breakable, I usually found it,” he said. “I simply could never sit still.” Even at the dinner table, he had to be busy. He would play with the saltshaker or twirl a steak knife between his fingers. He’d play with his food too, mixing everything on his plate together and adding

sugar and mayonnaise as if he was making a casserole. Sometimes he'd pour milk on top and eat the resulting concoction. "It drove my mom crazy," he said.

To make matters worse, he never seemed to listen to warnings. One night at a Mexican restaurant, his parents told him to be careful of the hot sauce. Michael couldn't resist the challenge—and besides, he thought, it looked just like ketchup. He dumped a huge spoonful of hot sauce on a tortilla chip and popped it in his mouth. Instantly, his eyes began streaming with tears as he waved his arms frantically. Way too hot!

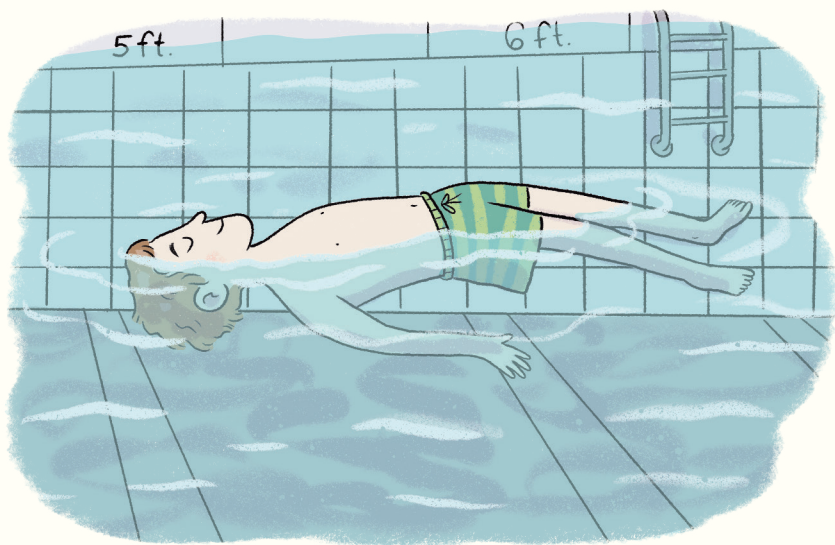


When Michael was seven, he came home one day to find his sisters in tears. His mom explained to Michael that she and his dad were separating.



Around this time, Michael learned to swim. Both of his older sisters were swimmers, so Michael had grown up around the pool and was excited to finally get in the water. But the pool wasn't anything like he had expected, and at first, he hated it. "We're talking screaming, kicking, fit-throwing, goggle-tossing hate," he said. Most of all, he didn't want to get his face wet. He made excuse after excuse: he was too cold, he had to go to the bathroom . . .

But his swimming teacher persisted, and Michael gradually became more comfortable in the water. Once he learned to swim, he loved it. "I felt so free," he said. He swam every day and stayed in the water for as long as possible.



Michael was a busy kid. In addition to swimming, he played lacrosse and baseball, and he enjoyed being around his sisters and his friends. But he was also a sensitive kid, and when his parents' separation became a divorce, it hit him hard. Often, he felt abandoned by his father.

School was tough too. The other kids made fun of the way Michael spoke, teasing him about having a lisp. Michael was self-conscious about his appearance as well; he thought his ears were much too big. He often wore a hat to make them look smaller, but other kids had figured out that teasing Michael about his ears was an easy way to get a reaction. Sometimes they would grab his hat and make comments about Spock, the Vulcan character from *Star Trek* with notably pointy ears.

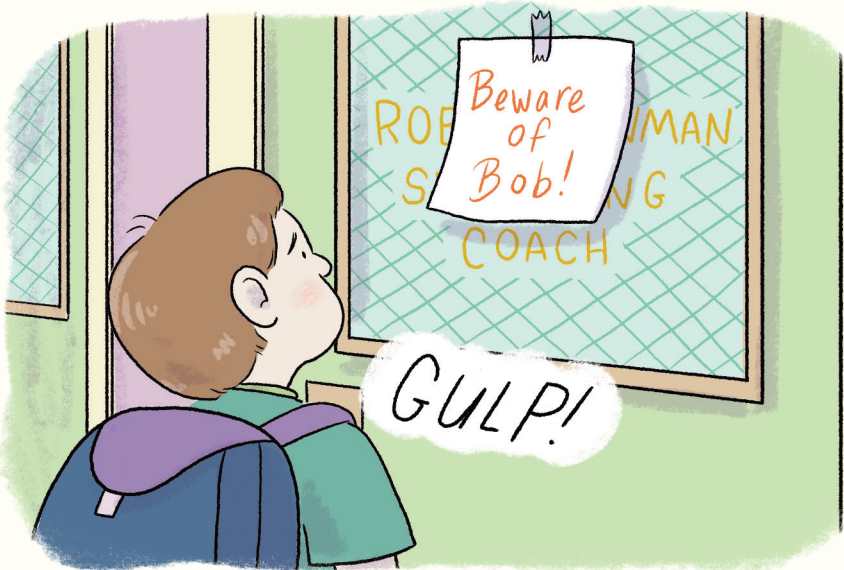


One of Michael’s teachers complained to his mom that he couldn’t concentrate on anything. But most people were more patient with him. His third-grade teacher told Michael it was healthy to have an “active personality.”

When Michael was in sixth grade, some of his school troubles started to make more sense after he was diagnosed with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). He began taking medication and found that it helped him focus. He didn’t take it on weekends, though, and at swim meets his behavior was sometimes a little wild. “I was either running off to the side to play with the other kids, banging my kickboard against the pool deck or sneaking to the front of the line to jump into someone else’s race,” he said.



But despite his trouble focusing, Michael’s talent as a swimmer was undeniable. By the time he was ten, he held the national record for his age group in the 100-meter butterfly. At eleven he began training even more seriously. His new coach was named Bob Bowman. Bob was strict, and with him around, Michael couldn’t get away with anything—the coach seemed to have eyes in the back of his head! If Michael splashed a teammate or hid someone’s cap, Bob would notice. One of the swimmers stuck a sign on Bob’s door that said “Beware of Bob.”



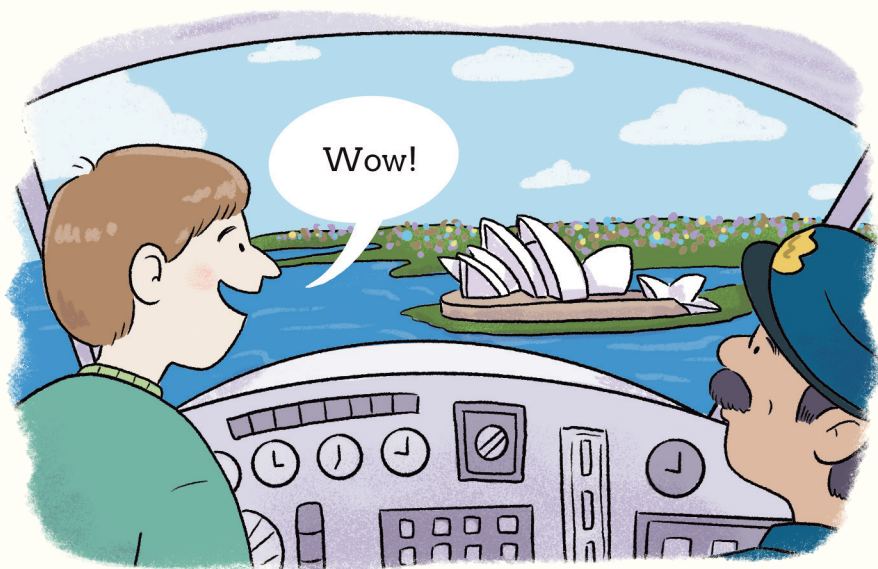
During his years at Dumbarton Middle School, Michael continued to have challenges in the classroom. Writing was difficult for him. Sometimes he didn’t

remember to hand in assignments, and sometimes he just didn't bother doing them. His quick temper got him in trouble too; once, another kid kept flicking at Michael's ears during a volleyball game, and Michael punched him. Michael was suspended, and his mom talked to him about learning better ways of resolving conflicts.

But he had a lot of fun with his friends at the pool. One of their games was speaking a made-up language called Bong. To speak Bong, you added *-ong* to the consonant sounds in a word and said the name of the vowels. The word *hot*, for example, would become *hong-oh-tong*. The best part about speaking Bong was that their coach couldn't understand what they were saying.

Or so they thought. One day, Bob handed Michael a note with realistic goals to aim for at his next swim meets. To Michael's shock, the note was written in Bong! Bob hadn't been fooled by the made-up language at all.

In 1999, Michael started ninth grade at Towson High School. He really wanted to play football, and maybe golf as well, but finally realized that swimming wouldn't leave him enough time for other sports. It was a sacrifice that he and his coach thought was worth making; Michael was winning races and breaking records, and Bob was starting to think that the Olympics were within reach.



Sure enough, at age fifteen, Michael was on his way to Sydney for the 2000 Summer Olympics. He was the youngest swimmer on a US team since 1932. On the flight to Australia, one of the flight attendants invited Michael and the two other teenagers on the team to come up to the cockpit. They looked out the window and saw Sydney Harbor and the Opera House down below!

Michael enjoyed his first Olympics. He didn't win any medals, but he swam well, clocking some of his best times ever. When he returned home, his mom arranged for a limousine to pick him up from the airport, and some of Michael's friends came to meet him there. They took the limo to the 7-Eleven for celebratory Slurpees. When Michael arrived back at his high school,

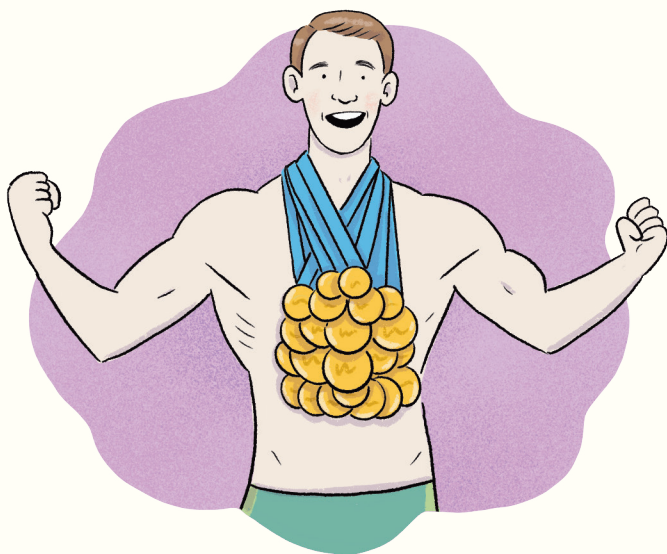
expecting to head to his usual classes, he was caught by surprise: the school had secretly planned a party. There were television cameras and banners, and people wearing buttons and T-shirts that said FLY MICHAEL FLY. Some of the other students even wanted his autograph!



In keeping with a US swim team tradition, Michael got a tattoo of the Olympic rings on his hip. He was already looking forward to the next Olympics, four years away—but no one could have predicted quite how successful he would be at them.

In 2004, Michael won eight medals—six of them gold—at the Summer Olympics in Athens. In Beijing in 2008, he won another eight gold medals—one in every event he entered, seven of them in record-breaking

time. No athlete had ever won so many medals at a single Olympics! At the London Games in 2012 and then Rio de Janeiro in 2016, Michael continued to break records and collect medals—in fact, at four Olympic Games in a row, he won more medals than any other athlete. He is considered to be the greatest swimmer of all time.





# Simone Biles



*And Still  
I Rise*

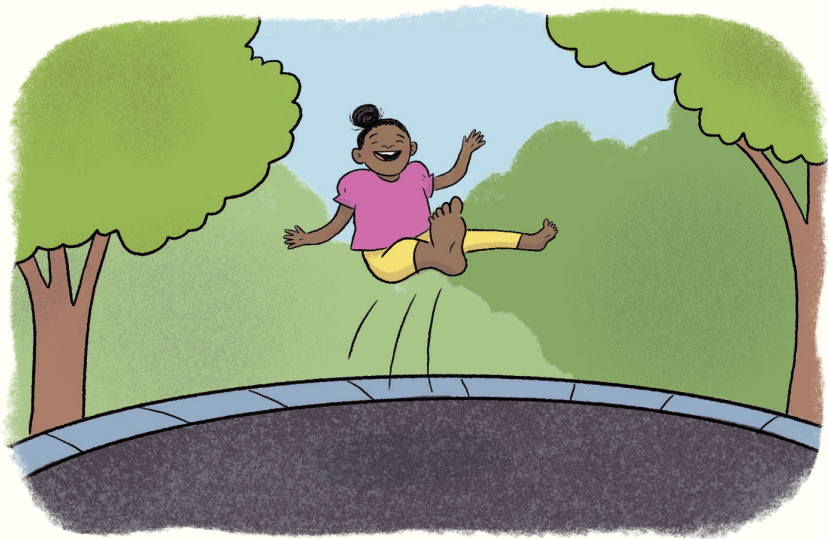
**A**merican gymnast Simone Biles is often called the GOAT: the greatest of all time. She has won seven Olympic medals and twenty-five world championship medals—more than any other gymnast. Her physical strength was evident from the start: as a little kid, she used to do pull-ups on her older brothers' outstretched arms!

**Simone Arianne Biles was born** in Columbus, Ohio, on March 14, 1997. She has an older sister and brother, Ashley and Tevin, and a little sister named Adria. Unfortunately, their birth mother, Shanon Biles, had problems with drugs and alcohol and wasn't able to care for the kids well, so when Simone was three, she and her siblings were taken into foster care. Their foster parents were kind and had a dog the kids could play with. There was a trampoline in the foster family's yard, too—but Simone wasn't allowed on it. After a few months, Simone's grandfather—Shanon's father, Ronald Biles—came to pick them up. The kids were going to stay with him and his wife, Nellie Cayetano Biles, while Shanon received treatment.



Simone's grandparents lived in a suburb near Houston, Texas, with their teenage sons. Her grandfather had grown up in the housing projects of Cleveland. He was one of nine kids and had joined the air force after high school. Nellie was from Belize and had come to the United States at eighteen to study nursing. When Simone was young, she called them Hamma and Hampaw because she couldn't say Grandma and Grandpa.

Simone thought her grandparents' house was beautiful. Her grandparents bought Barbies and clothes for her, and the room she shared with her sisters had shelves filled with new books. But best of all was what she spotted outside: a trampoline! And this time, she got to use it. "For what seemed like hours, I bounced and twirled and flipped and somersaulted," she said.



Simone and her baby sister, Adria, were happy with their grandparents, but Ashley and Tevin missed their mother. When it became clear that Shanon would not be able to raise her children, Ashley and Tevin moved in with their Aunt Harriet in Cleveland so they could stay closer to her. Meanwhile, Simone's grandparents began the lengthy process to adopt Simone and Adria.

Simone's grandpa had been the one who chose her name; as a teenager, he'd been a big fan of Nina Simone. "I've always loved knowing that he was the one who named me," Simone said. It made her feel like he'd been watching over her from the very beginning. When Simone was six, she and Adria put on their fanciest dresses—blue for Simone and pink for Adria—and went to the courthouse with their grandparents to finalize the adoption. That very night, Simone began calling her grandparents Mom and Dad.

Simone was a fearless kid with boundless energy, and she was always climbing and jumping, running and roughhousing. Her big brothers Ron and Adam used to bounce her on the trampoline to see how high she could fly and how many flips she could do in the air. Her mom sometimes worried she'd get hurt, but Simone loved it. She might be small but she was strong too; she used to climb up her brothers' bodies to sit on their shoulders or ask them to hold their arms out for her to do pull-ups!



One rainy day, Adam, who was now teaching at Simone's day care, decided to take all the kids to the nearby gym for a field trip. It was the first time Simone had seen gymnastics equipment—beams and bars and vaults—and she couldn't wait to try it out. She came home with a letter inviting her to enroll in classes at Bannon's Gymnastix, and her mom signed her up that same week. Simone was thrilled. Her coach, Aimee Boorman, later described her first impression of Simone: a tiny muscular girl who couldn't sit still.

Simone's sister Adria tried out gymnastics too, but she didn't love it like Simone did and decided to join Girl Scouts instead. The rest of the time, the two girls were inseparable. They played hopscotch, jump rope,

and soccer. They rode their bikes, making zooming noises and pretending they were riding motorbikes, or they drove their toy cars around, pretending to be cops and giving each other tickets. One of their favorite games was one they called “Trying Not to Laugh”: one girl would take a big mouthful of water and the other had thirty seconds to make her laugh and spew water everywhere.



One day, Simone and Adria were riding their bikes on their street when they spotted something on the ground: three small blue eggs. One was crushed and had yellow fluid trickling out, but the other two were whole. “Let’s save them so the babies can hatch,” Simone

said. Back at home, they gently put the eggs in a plastic container and filled it with warm water. But the next afternoon, when they checked on the eggs, the water was cloudy and yellow—the eggs were leaking! Simone and Adria were horrified: had they killed the baby birds? But their neighbor Marissa started to laugh. “Those aren’t bird eggs!” she said. Simone and Adria had been trying to hatch paintballs.

One day, playing in the backyard, Simone spotted a rock on the ground and tossed it over the fence. To her surprise, there was a splash. “Is there a pool over there?” Adria asked, picking up another rock and throwing it. *Splash!* The girls thought this was hilarious. Throwing rocks over the fence into the neighbor’s pool became their new favorite game—until they decided to climb the fence so they could see their rocks landing in the water. Their neighbor caught them in the act and told their mom. Until then, he’d thought his dog was responsible for the rocks in his pool!

At the gym, Simone was mastering new skills at a speed that stunned her coaches. She was learning four main types of apparatus: floor, beam, vault, and her least favorite, the bars. “I’m just not good at bars,” she told her coach. She was short, with small hands, and the bars were so high! They scared her. But she practiced until she was dreaming about her routines when she fell asleep at night.



By the time Simone was in sixth grade, she was competing—and winning—against much older gymnasts. She was starting to dream big, fantasizing about making the national team and going to the Olympics. There was a big competition coming up—the level nine Western Championships—and to qualify for it, she knew she needed to score high at a regional championship. Simone was determined to do it: her dad had told her that if she qualified, they could get a dog. She and Adria had been begging for a puppy for years.

When the big day came, Simone performed all her routines beautifully, taking first place on floor and second place all-around. When her score flashed up on the scoreboard, she heard Adria, who was watching from the stands, start screaming, “We’re getting a dog!”



A few months later, a German shepherd puppy joined the family. Simone named her Maggie Elena.



At home and at the gym, Simone was happy. At school, however, she was not. Because she needed to spend thirty hours a week training, she'd switched to a private middle school close to her gym for seventh and eighth grade. She missed her old friends—and her new teacher didn't even bother to learn her name. All year long, he called her Somalia because there was a map of Somalia on the wall behind her. On top of that, she found it hard to focus and was easily distracted. She was finally diagnosed with ADHD and began taking medication, which helped a lot.

In the gym, however, Simone had no trouble

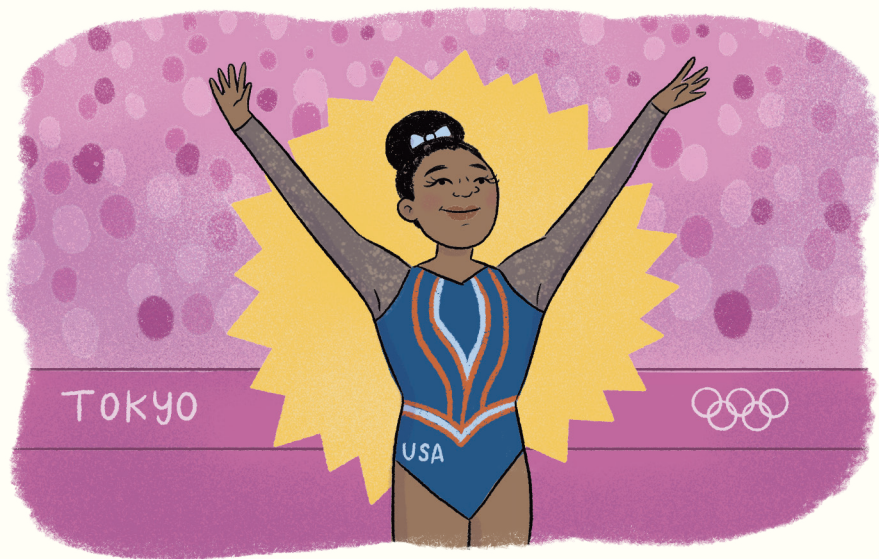
concentrating: “I could be laser focused,” she said. Still, the next couple of years presented many challenges. A bad fall on the bars shook her confidence, and she was heartbroken when she wasn’t chosen for the 2011 USA women’s junior team. Perhaps hardest of all, she had to make a difficult decision: should she go to the public high school where she’d be reunited with her oldest friends, or should she be homeschooled so that she could pursue a career in elite gymnastics? She wanted both. Part of her dreamed about being an ordinary teenager—but in the end, after a lot of tears and a few temper tantrums, she chose gymnastics.



Five years later, Simone won her first Olympic gold medal at the 2016 Summer Olympics in Rio de Janeiro.

By the end of that year's Olympic Games she had collected five medals, four of them gold—and by 2022, she had won an incredible twenty-five medals at World Championship events, more than any other gymnast in history.

But Simone's contributions to the world of gymnastics go beyond the athletic and artistic. When she and many other young American gymnasts experienced abuse by their team's doctor, she spoke up about her experiences and demanded that those who failed to protect the young athletes be held accountable. In 2021, Simone got a tattoo of Maya Angelou's words on her collarbone: "and still I rise." It is a line from a poem about Black pride, surviving and overcoming oppression and abuse, and the strength of the human spirit.



In a sport in which athletes are too often pushed to take risks, it takes courage to choose self-care over medals, but Simone did so at the Tokyo Olympics. When she lost her sense of body awareness as she tumbled through the air—a dangerous occurrence that gymnasts refer to as the twisties—she withdrew from the event, helping start an important conversation about mental health.

In 2022, she was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom by President Joe Biden. At twenty-five years of age, Simone Biles was the youngest person to ever receive this honor.

★ This was a sneak peek of *Kid Olympians: Summer*.  
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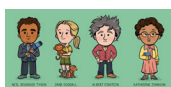
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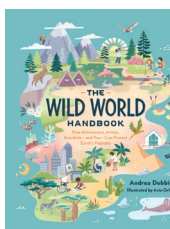


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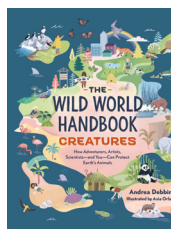


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