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Redemption in '04 for Black former Olympic Gymnast

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By: RON THOMAS, BlackAmericaWeb.com

Ron Galimore, the first black Olympic gymnast, never got a chance to perform in the world's greatest sports event: The United States boycotted the 1980 Olympics in Moscow to protest Russia's invasion of Afghanistan.

At last, partial compensation has arrived during the 2004 Olympics. Now, Galimore is senior director – that means he's the boss – of the USA Gymnastics men's program. It has already produced: a silver medal in the team event, and the first American, Paul Hamm, to win Olympic gold in the all-around men's competition.

There's a likely chance of winning additional medals in Monday's finale of the gymnastics competition, and the possibility that this Olympic team's success will stop – or at least slow down – the elimination of men's Division I intercollegiate gymnastics teams. In 1982, there were 79; now there are 19. That steep decline usually is attributed to the unintended consequences of Title IX requirements for parity in men's and women's sports programs, and to budgetary reasons.

"I'm hoping (the current team's success) will have a positive impact," Galimore told **BlackAmericaWeb.com** during a phone interview from Athens, Greece. "I don't think one program was dropped when we won the gold in 1984. I'm hoping the attention will gamish creative energy in trying to maintain the programs."

He already has heard that gymnastics clubs have been deluged with calls from parents that want to enroll their children.

"I really think (the sport's popularity) is going to explode because we've gotten such good press out of this," said University of Nebraska men's coach Francis Allen. He recalled that as a child Hamm was inspired by a Russian gold medal winner. Allen wonders, "How many boys and girls were watching Paul and said 'I want to win a gold



Ron Galimore

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The success of the men's program has helped soothe the pain Galimore, the son of the late Chicago Bears football star Willie Galimore, still feels from the 1980 boycott.

When Ron Galimore made that Olympic team, he had already been a three-time national champion in floor exercise and the vault. "At the time, Ron could jump out of the building," said University of California-Berkeley coach Barry Weiner. "He was so explosive. I believe at the time he was the best vaulter in the world."

That's what Galimore thought, too.

Then Russia invaded Afghanistan in December of 1979 and President Jimmy Carter responded by withdrawing the U.S. team from the Moscow Olympics.

There were 61 countries that joined the boycott, leaving 80 to compete.

Meanwhile, Carter's decision ruined Galimore's master plan to win a medal and then become a television sports commentator.

"When the boycott happened, I was devastated," said Galimore. "I felt a little forgotten because people didn't want to talk about it. It took me about five years to get over that because you're thinking 'What if? What if?' But I was able to brush that off and get back on my feet."

Galimore worked in marketing, handling a major sponsorship for the U.S. Gymnastics Foundation, opened his own gymnastics training center and was Florida's men's gymnastics chairman for five years.

When he became director of USA Gymnastics men's program in 1994, it was so disorganized that there was serious doubt the United States would qualify for the 1996 Atlanta Olympics. The program rallied under his direction to win fifth place in the 1996 and 2000 Olympics.

That was commendable but, "We had a summit in 2000 and we didn't want to be fifth anymore," said Olympic assistant coach Miles Avery, who also is black. "It's great to be in the top six, but that's not medaling."

Now the silver team medal has been won, thanks largely to Galimore's organizational skills. Unlike many foreign countries that train Olympic-caliber athletes at a central site, American gymnasts are spread throughout the country among college teams, club teams and private training centers. Yet, Galimore has been able to coordinate his sport's coaches, judges, administrators and athletes to create a cohesive Olympic effort.

"I think Ron does a good job of meeting everyone's needs," coach Weiner said.

Avery, who has been seen on television lifting athletes up to the rings and high bar throughout the Olympics,

also played a major role. He's the personal coach for three Olympians – Paul and Morgan Hamm, along with Blaine Wilson – and made a critical decision that helped Paul Hamm rally from 12th place to first place in the all-around after a shocking fall on the vault.

As Hamm trained for the Olympics, Avery suggested that he simplify his high bar routine by reducing the number of release moves (taking both hands far off the bar) from five to three. That paid off when Hamm perfectly executed three releases to score a decisive 9.837 out of a possible 10 in the all-around's last event.

"He was able to withstand tremendous pressure and do the best routine on high bar in his life," said Avery, who is Ohio State's head coach.

On Monday, U.S. men could win additional gold in individual competitions in the high bar, parallel bars and vault. Even if they don't, Galimore already feels partly redeemed for the 1980 boycott.

"To go from not thinking we would qualify for the 1996 Games to today's success truly does help," he said. "Being part of it and at the helm of it helped me feel there was a purpose for me to do something else big. It doesn't replace the opportunity taken away from me, but it's helped me in the second stage of my life."

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