

# **HEART OF GOLD AGONY OF FEAT BY GYMNAST STRUG ENSURES THRILL OF U.S. VICTORY ONE FOR THE TEAM: A WOMAN'S COURAGE SYMBOLIZES A GROUP'S UNPRECEDENTED TRIUMPH.**

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**Date:** July 24, 1996

**Section:** Front

ATLANTA – Kerri Strug came to Atlanta for the gold medal. By the time she made her final vault, she did not know the United States already had earned the gold.

What she did know Tuesday night as she stood at the head of the runway looking at the vaulting horse was that her left ankle was in pain, that her first attempt had ended on her rear end, that both of teammate Dominique Moceanu's vaults before hers had gone splat as well, that she was the last U.S. competitor - that no country had ever defeated Russia or the Soviet Union in Olympic women's team gymnastics.

"Kerri, we need another vault," her personal coach Bela Karolyi said he told her as she limped back for her second attempt. "Can you do it?"

"How close are we?" she asked.

"We're very close," he said.

"I will do it."

And she did - a one-footed landing of a Yurchenko 1 1/2 somersault worth a score of 9.712.

It was not the drama of Mary Lou Retton's perfect 10 in the vault that won Retton the all-around gold at the 1984 Los Angeles Games.

It was bigger.

It was more like Shun Fujimoto, the Japanese male gymnast at the 1976 Montreal Olympics who went onto the rings with a broken leg knowing that without his score in the last event, his country's string of four consecutive Olympic gold medals would be snapped. Fujimoto performed his routine fully aware of the pain that awaited his

dismount from 10 feet up. He stuck the landing and dislocated his knee, but he stretched Japan's winning streak to five.

Tuesday night at the Georgia Dome, the home team snapped the longest winning streak in gymnastics, 10 Soviet or Russian golds in 10 tries. Overshadowed by the red-white-and-blue euphoria over Mary Lou's all-around gold in Los Angeles was the fact that Romania took the team championship. And that, like every other gymnastics achievement in '84, was lessened by the Soviet Union's boycott of those Olympics.

"The United States team was truly worthy of its first place," said Leonid Arkaev, coach of the silver-medal winning Russian team.

### **Better than 1984 team**

"We met here maybe the best American team I have ever seen," said Octavian Belu, coach of the third-place Romanians. "They were better than the team in Los Angeles (which won the silver)."

Second to Russia after Sunday's compulsory round, the United States took the lead on its first rotation, the uneven bars, and never relinquished it. The final score was United States 389.225, Russia 388.404, Romania 388.246.

It was the oldest (average age 17-plus) and most experienced (three had previous Olympic experience and all had competed in world championships) team the United States had ever sent to the Games.

"This is the first time we have had all gymnasts healthy at one time," said assistant national coach Mary Lee Tracy. "The strength and maturity of this team has led them to the gold."

### **Teen spirit**

That and a rare collective chemistry in what is really an individual sport. Strug's injury, as she would learn later, was much less severe than Fujimoto's. But it may have come at an equally high personal cost.

Like Fujimoto, her injury - a severely sprained left ankle in which two outside tendons were torn - may keep her from competing for the all-around gold. She qualified with the seventh highest individual score overall and in the last of three U.S. spots. In

addition, the floor exercise competition, for which she qualified first, and the vault, where she ranked fifth, also may be impossible for her.

"I have very mixed feelings," she said after returning to a news conference from Crawford Long Hospital, where X-rays of her ankle showed no fracture. "History was on the line. I wanted us to win the team gold. At the same time I had a goal for myself of making the all-around finals because I didn't make it in Barcelona."

But she said she wasn't thinking of that after she heard the pop in her foot when she landed her first vault.

"The other girls were yelling 'C'mon. Shake it off. You're OK,' " Strug said. "I don't think they realized I was really hurt. But I knew that Dominique Moceanu had messed up on her two vaults (a 9.137 and a 9.200), and I saw the gold sort of slipping away. I just said 'Please, God, help me out here' and let the adrenaline take over."

She had 30 seconds from the time her first score went up to start down the runway for her second vault. The scoring fractions ran to three decimal places, and Russia's Rozalia Galiyeva had yet to end the final rotation with her floor exercise.

Who could figure the math?

"I didn't look at the scores," U.S. Coach Martha Karolyi said. "I just wanted to keep the team spirit and get them fired up. Looking at the scoreboard is the worst advice you could give any athlete."

### **'My own choice'**

And if a medal is at stake, Strug said, "When you're in a situation like this at the Olympic level, I'm 18 years old. I think I should be able to make my own choice."

Down the runway she went. Up into the air and over one and a half times. Down onto the mat - standing. Down in the history books.

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