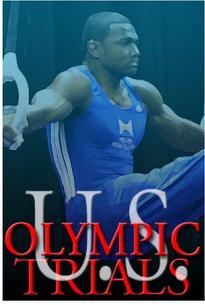


Written by dwight normile

Saturday, 30 June 2012 09:31



When Danell Leyva predicted Olympic gold for the U.S. men a few weeks ago at the Visa Championships, I chalked it up to youthful exuberance. And when Jonathan Horton echoed Leyva a few minutes later, I figured he had probably just breathed a little too much chalk. (But thanks for the quotes. guys.)

But then I got to thinking, which I sometimes forget to do. *Why not?* The team that will be named this weekend should be stronger than the one in 2008, when two alternates stepped in to secure the bronze in Beijing. Why can't this talented bunch of Americans pull off an upset in London? Why shouldn't they be gunning for gold? The 3-up-3-count format tears down the safety net for everybody. Any team can choke, as China and Japan have both proved in the past.

"We understand what we're up against a little more (than in 2008)," Horton said. "I don't ever want to come across as cocky, but we know we can win. ... And we have to believe in that. And if we don't ... then why even go?"

The U.S. men seem to be matching their improved physical ability with a new measure of confidence. Or maybe it's the other way around. Either way, you need both to succeed in any sport.

Remember 1984? Nobody gave the U.S. men much chance to win at home in Los Angeles. China had just shocked the Soviet Union with a victory at the 1983 Budapest world championships, where the U.S. finished out of the medals. Even without the Soviets in Los Angeles, the Americans still needed to get past China, which had superstars Li Ning and Tong Fei, plus four more superb talents.

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Prior to those games, even U.S. head Olympic coach Abie Grossfeld told the media he thought his team would finish second.

"I thought we could beat Japan," he told me here in San Jose, implying that China would win gold.

But inspiration was brewing among Grossfeld's all-star team, which was composed of UCLA-Nebraska rivals and a three-time Olympian from Oklahoma. The Bruins were Peter Vidmar, Mitch Gaylord and Tim Daggett, the Huskers Jim Hartung and Scott Johnson. Bart Conner was the lone Sooner. At some point in their careers, all six would be national champions. The Olympic trials that produced this Super Six left a lot of talent on the sidelines, just as the 2012 version will.

During the days prior to those Olympics at UCLA's Pauley Pavilion, Hartung became a believer, and then a convincer. He told his teammates, "We can beat China."

Grossfeld did a little strategizing himself. Scouting the Chinese during practice, he noticed things. And anyone who knows Grossfeld understands that he is very resourceful. He says he saw that the Chinese were doing relatively simple dismounts off rings, for example. He knew his team could do harder dismounts, and he made sure some of them did. He also helped in the confidence department, allowing guys to take a calculated risk. Gaylord responded by catching his fickle Gaylord II on high bar. No Chinese was throwing a Gaylord II.

But Hartung's words must have been infectious, because the whole team got on a roll that week in L.A. And the Chinese must have felt it, because they lost their invincibility. They made mistakes. And like Hartung had said, the U.S. beat China to win what remains the only Olympic gold for the U.S. men. Simple as that.

"If the truth were to be told, I only said what everyone was thinking — and feeling," Hartung told me yesterday. "I just happened to be a little more vocal than my teammates."

I asked Grossfeld for his version, and he didn't deny it. "If anyone rallied the team, it would have

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been Jim," he said.

Said Hartung, now an assistant coach for his beloved Cornhuskers: "The 1984 games almost seem like a dream to me these days. Maybe a dream come true would be more accurate."

Which brings us back to 2012, and a U.S. team of similar caliber to the one 28 years ago.

Olympic gold seemed improbable for the U.S. men in 1984, but Leyva won't let himself think that way heading to London.

"I kind of know that we're going to win, because I have to keep saying that to myself," he said. "...I have to think like that, otherwise it's not gonna happen."

I watched Hartung and his teammates pull off the Miracle on Mats in 1984, and it was really something special. But it all started with a dream and belief.

Leyva and Horton are believers already. And while that won't guarantee success in London, it will at least allow for it.