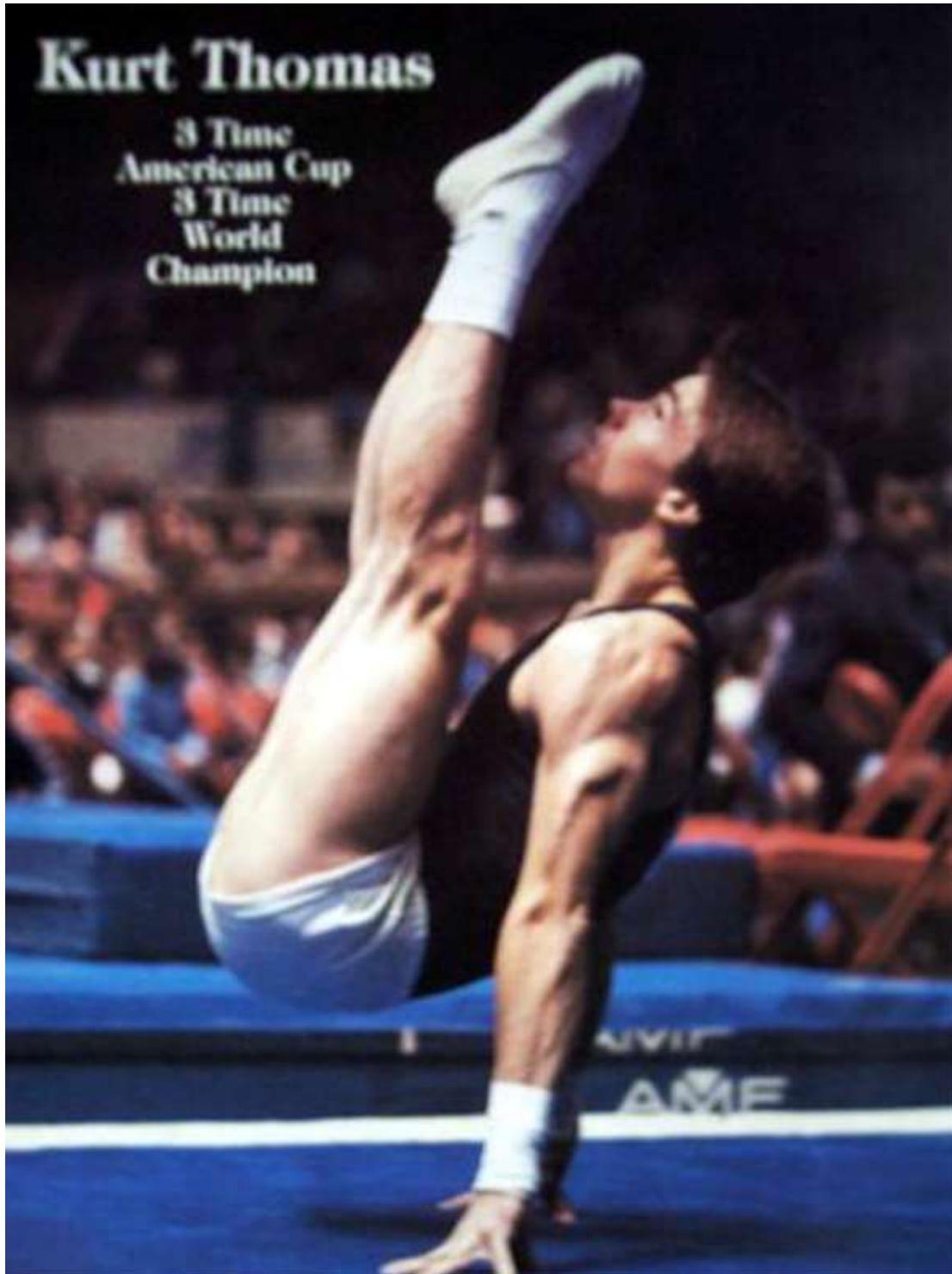


WAS - Gymnastics Legend

Kurt Thomas

2002 Honoree



The Miamian Who Put American Gymnastics on the World Map

At the end of World War II, the United States was the most dominant economic power in the world. The US excelled in amateur sports measured in part by Olympic Games medals won. The sudden surge by Soviet Union (USSR) athletes as Olympic Games medallists at the 1952 Helsinki Olympics caught the United States and other countries by surprise. The sport of gymnastics was no exception. The USSR and other Eastern bloc countries dominated women's gymnastics during the cold war era. In men's gymnastics, only Japan stood equal and challenged the Soviets and Eastern Europeans in Olympic and World Championship competitions.

Meanwhile in the United States, the sport of gymnastics languished under the leadership of the Amateur Athletic Union (AAU). The AAU was an umbrella organization that put most of its efforts into promoting "the more important Olympic sports" of swimming, track and field and basketball. Some of the AAU gymnastics leadership was corrupt. Gymnastics was left to struggle on its own. With the exception of the women's gymnastics team bronze in the London Olympics of 1948, the United States won no Olympic or World Championship medals from 1932 until 1970.

After several years of struggle, a small group of men's collegiate gymnastics coaches spearheaded a movement to create new leadership in gymnastics by forming the United States Gymnastics Federation (USGF) in 1962. Federation leaders hired a bright energetic Executive Director by the name of Frank Bare. During the International Gymnastics Federation (FIG) Congress in Ljubljana in 1970, FIG President Arthur Gander awarded the USGF the FIG Charter making the USGF the ruling gymnastics organization in the United States and stripping the AAU of that power. An eight year struggle for power in gymnastics between the organizations was over.

A breakthrough in WC medals occurred when a 98 lb. pixie from California named Cathy Rigby placed second on the balance beam during the 1970 World Championships. It was a great accomplishment but still not a gold medal win for American gymnastics. Rigby went on to compete in the 1972 Munich Olympics without winning any medals. The United State's gymnastics gold medal drought continued in Olympic and World Championship competitions. Cathy retired and pursued a successful long running musical stage career as Peter Pan and Cat in the Hat.

Unexpectedly, American Peter Kormann, won a bronze Olympic Games medal in the floor exercise event in Montreal in 1976, but again, the US was without a gold medal.

During 1969 a young man living with his mother and sister in the Silver Blue Lake Apartments on NW103rd Street just behind Miami Central Senior High School was introduced to formal gymnastics training. He looked small and young for his age. There was talk that Miami Central, a school with a 95% plus black student population would begin fielding a gymnastics team in the Greater Miami Athletic Conference (GMAC). Don Gutzler, a junior high school teacher from Southern Illinois University would transfer to Central and coach the new team. Don and I both judged the GMAC high school meets and were members of the Southeastern Judging Association. The gymnastics equipment at Central was poor at best. The Athletic Director told Don that he could "have the coaching supplement" if he promised not to have a team. Don was not to be swayed. He built a team anyway.

I was the head coach at Miami Dade Community College (MDCC) and we were the reigning 1969 National Junior College Athletic Association (NJCAA) Champions. MDCC is only five minutes drive from Miami Central. Earleen Carey, a Central graduate, was an attractive student attending MDCC who did gymnastics. Earleen was selected the 1970 Orange Bowl queen. She first told me about Kurt. She often watched him flipping in the grass by his apartment complex. Danny Carey, Earleen's younger brother and a senior with a car, drove freshman Kurt over to MDCC to workout in the evening community gymnastics program. He was intimidated a little bit that first night by some of my private gym school girl gymnasts who were more advanced than him because of their training. Gutzler soon began bringing the entire Central team to the community college for workouts. I soon found myself coaching Kurt during my varsity workouts. Some of my college gymnasts were a little jealous of Kurt because he learned so fast and easy. Kurt was very brash! His teammates; Walter Hayes, Jim Daley, Ricky Givens and Sam Gilmore were all improving rapidly. Some GMAC coaches were uneasy with the fact that this new upstart team was getting extra help from a college coach and that the Central team was becoming a threat to win the conference championship. The policy at MDCC was that any gymnast could workout in the evening gymnastics program for free as often as they liked. We had gymnasts working out from all over Miami and Hialeah. Kurt's Central team went on to win two GMAC Championships (1972-73). Kurt won one more at Miami Lakes where he transferred his senior year (1974). His ability and presence elevated the caliber of the entire GMAC league.

The AAU developed a strong junior Olympic program in the late sixties and seventies. I felt this was an excellent way to give gymnasts in my geographical area a chance to gain national competition experience. My interests had now

become coaching both male and female gymnasts for open national and international competitions and promoting the sport of gymnastics by conducting important competitions in Miami. I opened a private gymnastics school in North Miami Beach in November of 1969 called the Muriel Grossfeld School of Gymnastics, named after my sister, an Olympian. Muriel had opened a similar school in New Haven Connecticut in 1967. I changed the name to Gymiami in 1972 to avoid confusion with Muriel's team and to identify gymnasts from Miami.

Tom Maloney, the AAU Gymnastics Administrator and former Army coach retired to Sarasota. I had competed against him and Army while I attended Southern Connecticut State University. Tom helped me immensely in developing my judging skills. I earned my international judging brevet in 1969 at the Penn State FIG course. As a member of the local Florida Gold Coast AAU, I lobbied the organization to bring a national gymnastics meet to Miami. I was selected meet director for the 1970 NAAU Gymnastics Championships to be held May 29th-31 at the Miami Beach Convention Center next door to the Jackie Gleason Theater. Elliot Roosevelt, FDR's son, was the Director of the Miami Beach Tourist Development Authority. He sure looked like the former President! He also authorized a five thousand dollar grant to bid for the meet. Jack Kelly, Olympic single skull champion and actress Grace Kelly's brother, was the current AAU President and Tom Maloney was the Gymnastics Administrator. The "Larry King," then of 710 am sports radio, interviewed me live about the NAAU competition in his Brickell Avenue studio.

I was the meet director for the USGF World Cup held June 5th 1971 at the Miami Beach Convention Center. Frank Bare of the new USGF ruling body sold the television rights for the World Cup to Dick Button of Candid Productions of New York. Button then sold the World Cup to ABC Wide World of Sports. Cathy Rigby was the featured American gymnast in the competition along with Kim Chace. We had a lot of equipment to set up and we were also going to be on live television. Kurt Thomas was one of the students in the volunteer equipment crew wearing red t-shirts with World Cup in white letters printed on the chest. Frank Bare, USGF Executive Director; Arthur Gander, FIG President; as well as the sinister George Gulack were in charge of administrating the competition event order and competition lineups. Little did they know as they walked past Kurt on repeated occasions during the competition; that they were looking at America's future gold medal World Champion.

Sponsors like Quaker Oats and Chevrolet were footing the transportation costs of AAU Regional Champions to the National AAU Junior Olympic Championships. I was selected gymnastics coach for the Florida Region for the 1969 NAAUJO. A young Kim Chace, two time Florida gymnastics Olympian, won the competition in San Diego. It elevated her to an international level competitor and a spot on the US 1970 WC team.

In the spring of 1971 fifteen year old Kurt finished a distant third in the 15-18 age group of his first AAU Regional Championship behind two eighteen year old MDCC gymnasts from out-of-state; John Olofsky and Gary Guido of New Jersey. John and Gary left Miami and went home for the summer leaving Kurt the option to move up and go to the 1971 NAAUJO Championships at the Air Force Academy. I convinced a reluctant and "doubting Thomas" to go to the meet for experience. He did go and he finished dead last!

Kurt worked hard over the next year and talked about winning "the next time." He improved! He placed third in the NAAUJO in Spokane in 1972. In a two week camp, he trained with Ron Galimore, the young 13-14 age group tumbling and trampoline sensation from Tallahassee as well as with Gymiami's Bonnie Harris (15-18) and Penny Graves (13-14) on the girls' side. Bonnie and Penny were both second all-around in their age group divisions and Ron was sixth.

Kurt won the 1973 NAAUJO at the University of Michigan. Three times is a charm! Even Newt Loken got excited watching Kurt perform. Carrie Englert (Zimmerman), a Tallahassee Tumbling Tot won the girl's seniors. In juniors, Ron Galimore was third and Amy Tubis was fifth. Quite a group from Florida considering that three future Olympians were blossoming before my eyes.

Kurt nursed a nagging shoulder injury in 1974 his senior year. He placed 2nd at the NAAUJO at Nebraska to Paul Simon. In less than a month, he learned new compulsory exercises so he could compete in the first ever USGF Junior Olympic competition. In the now famous "outdoor JO Nationals" in Illinois, Kurt finished second to Bart Conner. In fact, Kurt had the highest optional routines score in the competition. I had taken Kurt to Nebraska and Don Gutzler had taken Kurt to Illinois. Don called me long distance after the USGFJO and expressed some disappointment with Kurt's second place finish. I reacted by saying, "Cheer up Don, Kurt just took on the best college prospect in the country in Bart Conner. He had to learn new compulsory routines and deal with the shoulder injury." I was elated!

It is hard for me to understand why Kurt was not recruited by the top collegiate team coaches. They were aware of him from the various gymnastic clinics that he attended. Bill Meade, Neil Schmidt and others had seen his work. I was hoping Kurt would pick a school where the coach was interested in international gymnastics training as well as collegiate competition. Kurt settled on Indiana State University with Coach Roger Council. Roger, a former trampolinist from Southern Illinois, had a reputation for developing great individual event specialists rather than all-around gymnasts, let alone international gymnasts. I had reservations about Kurt going to ISU having sent Roger other athletes including Ronnie Miller, Sonny Cornicelli and Eduardo Navarro, a great all-around gymnast. Roger had left Ed home from NCAA Division II Nationals in favor of an event specialist after Ed had posted a fifty-three point

plus average in the all-around during the dual meet season. This did not sit well with me! Indiana State was making a move from NCAA Division II to Division I. Additionally; they were going to host the 1975 Division I NCAA Championships.

The summer of 1975 after Kurt's freshman year, Council went to Utah to pursue graduate studies leaving Kurt alone to train for the USGF Championships of the USA at Southern Illinois in Carbondale. Kurt began considering transferring. I was in Carbondale with Cathy Shotwell, my 1976 Olympic trials finalist, for the coed Championships of the USA. Kurt and I briefly discussed the situation in the bleachers at the meet. The truth was that Thomas was so talented gymnastically that he needed discipline as much as coaching. Council's style of coaching was very authoritative. Kurt and Roger found common ground. They had a great run together. Kurt's status as an elite international gymnast probably helped elevate Council in his quest to become the next Executive Director of the USGF after Frank Bare's departure in 1979-80. Kurt and basketball legend Larry Bird were the two best athletes on the Sycamore's campus during the late 70's. Being a former basketball player from Indiana and a regular attendee and demonstrator at the Indiana State Gymnastics Institute, I was quite proud of their accomplishments together.

Kurt made parallel bar finals in 1975 his freshman year in his first NCAA Championships hosted by Indiana State. He made the 1975 Pan American Games team and finishing third all-around, the highest on the US team; plus two silver (PH,V) and one bronze (HB) on the individual events and team gold over Cuba. In 1976 Kurt made the Olympic team to Montreal with the highest qualifying score and overcame a lingering hand injury finishing 21st all-around just behind teammates Wayne Young and Peter Kormann. His gymnastics surged winning the 1977 NCAA all-around title, the American Cup three times (1978, 79, 80) and other international events. The "Thomas Flair" on pommel horse became his trademark.

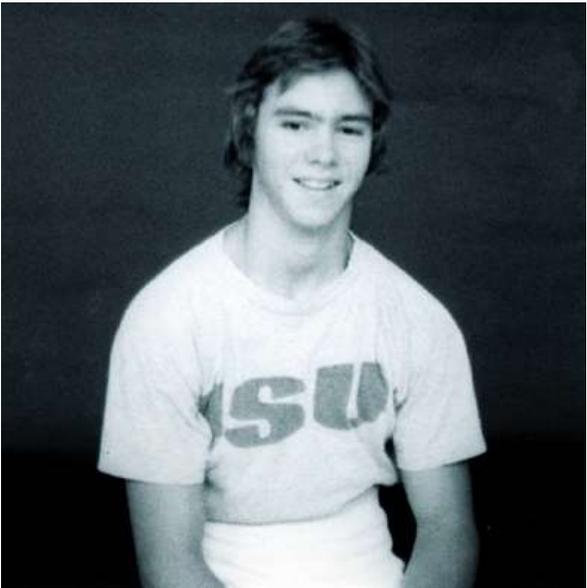
The 1978 World Championships in Strasbourg, France were the perfect opportunity for Kurt. Although Kurt was most known for his pommel horse and parallel bars performances, the floor exercise event set the drama. Nikolai Andrianov, the 1976 Olympic champion and the eventual all-around champion in Strasbourg, was in the floor exercise finals and had almost purposely left his strength part out of his preliminary routine. The brash Thomas had left out his strength part in the prelims not to be intimidated by the Soviet champion. In the floor final Kurt executed his strength part and his "flairs". When the scores came up after a meticulous performance including the one and three quarter full and one-half "Thomas" dive roll, Kurt Thomas became the first American to win a gold medal in the World Championship sharing the honor with American Marcia Frederick who had also earned US gold on the uneven parallel bars event. Kurt Thomas had put American gymnastics on the world map.

In 1979, the USGF hosted the first World Championship in the US at Tarrant Arena in Ft. Worth, Texas. Kurt won a record six medals: two gold (FX, HB), three silvers (PH, PB, AA) and one bronze (team). Kurt was now one of the most elite gymnasts in the world.

Unfortunately, President Jimmy Carter and the US Olympic Committee boycotted the United States from the 1980 Moscow Olympics. Kurt made the big decision to retire and then launched a successful professional gymnastics show, the US Professional Gymnastics Classic, for over ten years which featured professional competition and entertainment.

In 1992, for the Barcelona Olympics, Kurt at age 36 made a competition comeback as professional athletes were eligible for the first time to compete in the Olympic Games. Kurt made the US national team finishing 16th in the Olympic trials but fell short of making the Olympic squad.

Kurt and Marcia recently celebrated the 25th anniversary of their 1978 gold medal achievement. In 2004, Kurt was inducted into the International Gymnastics Hall of Fame in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma. Kurt along with his wife and children live in Plano, Texas. He is the owner of the Kurt Thomas Gymnastics Training Center.





Sidebars... Both humorous and factual about Kurt Thomas

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