Olympic Dreams Deferred: How Afghanistan kept America’s 1st Black male gymnast from his dreams of gold in Moscow.

By Chris Watkins
The Olympic Rings logo is a design that’s ideals are never lost in translation, despite the global reach of the Olympic games. The Rings, designed in 1912 to acknowledge the five participating continents in the games, stand for passion, faith, victory, work ethic and sportsmanship. So it should come as no surprise that here, we highlight Ron Galimore, the first Black male gymnast to ever make the Olympic team through each of these ideals.
Ron’s father, Willie, was a star running back for the Chicago Bears. So it’s only natural that his athletically gifted son would be, a gymnast? It was actually at Willie’s urging that his son became passionate about gymnastics, by teaching Ron how to walk on his hands at an early age. Although Willie died in a car accident at the age of 29, Ron’s mom said, “He would have been to every one of Ron's performances," Audrey Galimore says. "The only thing his father saw him doing was cartwheeling through the house and breaking up my lamps. Wherever we were ... Ron would be cartwheeling up and down the aisle.”

Despite being the only black, and often the only male, in his gymnastics practices, Ron was never discouraged from pursuing a career in the sport he loved.
Ron’s natural athletic ability was clearly evident all over the mat. Being the son of an NFL star made Ron the perfect prototype for an Olympic-caliber gymnast. As one of the few blacks who chose gymnastics over sports such as basketball and football, Ron’s ability was unparalleled in gymnastics. While attending LSU, Ron won national titles in both the floor exercise and vault in 1977. However, Ron set such a high standard for himself, and so was disappointed with his progress both in the classroom and on the mat and transferred to Iowa State in 1979. This would be the turning point in one of the most decorated careers in men’s gymnastics history.
If anyone had thought Ron Galimore reached his potential at LSU, they were sadly mistaken. He was just scratching the surface. Galimore again won the national title in and the floor exercise in 1979. After defending his vault crown again in 1980, Ron faced a difficult defense in 1981. After his opponent scored an unbeatable 9.9 in his final vault, it seemed as if Galimore would have to concede his championship. Instead, Galimore landed the first perfect 10 in NCAA history, and thus retained his crown in a most dramatic fashion.
Galimore’s efforts and hard work allowed him to be the first black man ever to be named to the U.S. Olympic Gymnastics team. However, this great accomplishment was overshadowed by the U.S. boycott of the 1980 Olympics, in protest of the U.S.S.R.’s invasion of Afghanistan. Galimore was devastated by the news that he would not be allowed to compete on the world’s biggest stage.

"What it could've meant for me financially to be the first African-American gymnast to win a gold medal could've been huge if I had any personality to go along with it," said Galimore. "And so, I thought about those things selfishly ... I thought it was bad to think those things, but I felt it. I think I ran the gamut on all of that. Today it is different. I don't feel that way."
Galimore still carries a sore spot from not being able to compete. When people ask him how he did in the 1980 Olympic Games, he replies with a terse “I didn’t.” But that did not discourage him from helping to advance the sport he loves. Galimore, in a 1983 Ebony magazine article, said he hoped his success would serve as an example for other blacks who love the sport as much as he does. After spending some time as an assistant coach at Iowa State, Galimore was hired by the U.S. Olympic Committee to become the national men’s program director. Now Galimore can live out his Olympic dreams every four years, even long after his high-flying vaults become feats of yesteryear. Despite his lack of an actual medal, there is no doubt, Galimore is the true embodiment of an Olympic champion.