

Kurt Thomas, Trailblazing Champion Gymnast, Dies at 64

The first American to win a world championship in men's gymnastics, he captured many medals but missed out on his best chance to take Olympic gold.

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Kurt Thomas, who became the first American to win a world championship event in men's gymnastics when he captured gold in the floor exercise at Strasbourg, France, in 1978, died on Friday. He was 64.

Thomas's wife, Rebecca, who owned and operated a gymnastics center with her husband in Frisco, Texas, near Dallas, confirmed the death, telling *International Gymnast* magazine that he had a stroke on May 24.

Thomas followed up his breakthrough at the 1978 championships by winning five world championship individual medals in 1979, including gold in the floor exercise once more and in the horizontal bar, at Fort Worth.

He joined with Bart Conner as trailblazing figures among American men in a sport in which women had garnered most of the attention and in which China, France, Japan and the Soviet Union had dominated men's international gymnastics.

Thomas was known for his daring and innovative moves in what came to be called the "Thomas Flair" on the pommel horse and the "Thomas Salto" in the floor exercise. In the "Flair," he flew into a series of wide-swinging leg moves in which he would kick his feet high into the air. The "Salto" involved a dangerous backward move in a tucked position.

But he never won an Olympic medal. He had yet to reach his prime when he competed at the 1976 Games. And though was a favorite at the 1980 Olympics in Moscow, he didn't get a chance to compete: The American team boycotted the Games in retaliation for the Soviet Union's invasion of Afghanistan.



Tony Duffy/Getty Images

Thomas took part in professional gymnastics shows and worked as a TV commentator at gymnastics events later in the 1980s, when the Olympics were still limited to amateurs. He tried a comeback, at 36, when the Olympic ban on professionals had been lifted, but he was unable to get past the United States trials for the 1992 Games.

Conner, who won the gold medal on the parallel bars at the 1979 world championships and at the 1984 Los Angeles Olympics, wrote on Twitter that “Kurt was a fierce rival, who went on to become a cherished friend.”

Kurt Billeaux Thomas was born in Miami on March 29, 1956. His father, who managed a meat company, died when he was 7, and he and his siblings were raised by their mother, Ellie, a secretary.

“I wanted to be a doctor and then a policeman, and then a pro basketball player or football,” he told The New York Times in 1979.

But at 14 he watched the Miami-Dade Junior College gymnastics team at a practice and was impressed. “I saw this guy swinging on a high bar, and I just thought it was kind of a neat sport,” he said.

Thomas played on a newly formed gymnastics team at his high school and won a scholarship to Indiana State University in Terre Haute.

He was a multiple N.C.A.A. champion, winning the parallel bars and all-around in 1977, and parallel bars, horizontal bar and the all-around in 1979. He helped take the men's gymnastics team to the 1977 national collegiate championship and ranked behind only Larry Bird, the future basketball Hall of Famer, as a campus celebrity.

Thomas received the Sullivan Award as the nation's leading amateur athlete in 1979 and was inducted into the International Gymnastics Hall of Fame in 2003.

In addition to his wife, Rebecca (Jones) Thomas, his survivors include their children, Hunter and Cassidy, as well as a son, Kurt, from a previous marriage.

In the run-up to the 1980 Moscow Games, television was raising Thomas's profile.

In April 1979, he made an appearance on Dick Cavett's TV show, in which he provided instruction to Cavett, who had been a gymnast in his high school days.

The previous month in New York City, before a packed house and an estimated 35 million television viewers, Thomas won all-around honors at the American Cup games in Madison Square Garden for the second year in a row despite a sore thumb, which he had injured in his final collegiate home meet the week before.

After the Garden event, where several Americans made it to the finals, Thomas said: "We'll be heard of in Moscow, you can bet on that. It's time for the world to look out for American gymnasts. We've arrived."

But the Moscow Games went on without the United States, and what could have been his greatest international triumph was not to be.