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There used to be a time in the United States that if you wanted to see boxing's future champions and stars, you'd watch the Summer Olympics. Since 1904, American fighters have won more medals (102) in boxing than any other Nation. For the record, the U.S. has also won the most Gold (47), Silver (21), and Bronze (34).

This week the 2004 Summer Olympics start in Athens, Greece. Years ago I used to look forward to the Summer Olympics because I couldn't wait to see the boxing. It was almost a forgone conclusion that the U.S. would win its share of medals. It was also assumed that those fighters who stood out at the Games would most likely challenge for a world title after turning professional.

Today that is not the case. As an indirect result of the horrific scoring in the 1988 Games in Seoul Korea, Olympic boxing is rarely seen in prime time any longer. On top of that, the U.S. has fallen on hard times in the last three Olympics, winning only two gold medals. During the 60's, 70's, and through the mid 80's, the Olympic trials used to be aired regularly on the three major broadcast networks. It wasn't all that long ago that boxing was a prime time sport at the Olympics. Some of boxing’s best amateur stars were introduced to the world through the Olympic Trials and Games.

Over the last 50 years, U.S. Olympians have provided boxing with some of it's greatest and most popular fighters in history. Fighters like Floyd Patterson, Cassius Clay, Joe Frazier, George Foreman, Sugar Ray Leonard, and Evander Holyfield. Sadly, today’s future boxing fans will not have much of a chance to watch the future greats of tomorrow, today. NBC, which is broadcasting the 2004 Summer Games, has relegated boxing to off-peak hours on their cable outlets, MSNBC and CNBC. That's a shame because some of boxing's biggest rivalries and most compelling twists of fate are a result of the Olympic Trials and Games.

One rivalry that stands out is the one between 1952 middleweight Gold medalist, Floyd Patterson and 1952 heavyweight Silver medalist,Ingemar Johansson. Johansson won the Silver when he was DQ'd versus American Ed Sanders in the second round during the heavyweight final. However, from 1959-61, Patterson and Johansson traded the heavyweight title back and forth in three historic fights. Patterson became the first fighter to win the heavyweight title twice when he knocked out Johansson in their 1960 rematch.

In the 1960 Olympic Trials, future Light Heavyweight Champion, Bob Foster was denied a spot on the U.S. Olympic team by future Heavyweight Champ, Cassius Clay. Clay was slotted in at light heavyweight, while Foster was asked to drop down to middleweight. Foster declined to drop in weight and turned pro. Foster and Clay both went on to become all time great fighters, and actually fought as pros. In 1972, Clay who had changed his name to Muhammad Ali, stopped Foster in 8 rounds. Buster Mathis was the U.S. heavyweight representative for the 1964 Games, based on his two decision victories over Joe Frazier. Shortly before the Games, Mathis broke his hand and Frazier went as the alternate. Frazier went on to win the Gold medal,

despite fighting with a broken thumb in the final. Frazier and Mathis met in 1968 as pros. Frazier stopped Mathis in the 11th round to retain his heavyweight title. Frazier was the only Gold medal winner at the 1964 Games, and went onto become an all time great heavyweight champion.

One of the most memorable Olympic bouts in history came at the 1968 Games. In the heavyweight Gold medal bout, 19 year old George Foreman stopped 29 year old Ionas Chapouls of Russia. At the time of Foreman's Olympic triumph, he'd only been boxing as an Amateur less than two years. Five years after winning the Gold medal, Foreman won the World Heavyweight title from 1964 Gold medalist, Joe Frazier. Foreman became the oldest heavyweight champ in history when he won the title in 1994 at age 45 for the second time.

I wonder how many fans realize how close the World came to seeing a Teofilo Stevenson-Larry Holmes Olympic bout. In the heavyweight final of the 1972 Olympic Trials, Duane Bobick stopped Holmes and earned the right to represent the U.S. at the Games in Munich. Bobick entered the Games as a strong favorite for a medal. Bobick's Olympic dream was shattered when he was stopped by Cuba's Teofilo Stevenson in the second round. Ironically, Bobick defeated Stevenson a year earlier at the 1971 Pan Am Games. Stevenson went onto win three Olympic Gold medals in 1972, 1976, and 1980. Larry Holmes would go onto become one of heavyweight history’s all time greats. Duane Bobick turned pro after the Games, but never challenged for the Heavyweight title.

Maybe the most celebrated team in Olympic history is the 1976 U.S. team that captured 7 medals, 5 Gold, 1 Silver and 1 Bronze. The most infamous story surrounding that team is how 132 pound Gold medalist Howard Davis, who also won the Val Baker trophy given to the outstanding Boxer of the Games, never won a world title as a pro. One story that didn't make the press was how Light Heavyweight Gold medalist, Leon Spinks had to be locked in his room so he couldn't eat in order for him to make weight. Speaking of Spinks, his younger brother Michael captured a Gold medal as a middleweight. And the darling of the team, Sugar Ray Leonard, fought with his girlfriend’s picture taped to his boxing shoe. The 1976 team produced two all time greats in Michael Spinks and Sugar Ray Leonard.

Under President Carter the United States boycotted the 1980 Games in Moscow for political reasons. In 1984 the city of Los Angeles hosted the Games and they were boycotted by many of the Eastern block countries who participated at the Moscow Games. I remember watching Evander Holyfield upset the top fighter at 178, Ricky Womack, in the 1984 trials a month before the Games. Womack was highly thought of by many, and a favorite for the Gold. Holyfield upset him on Friday night, and then because he was a lower seed, had to beat him again Saturday afternoon to make the team, which he did even more convincingly. In the heavyweight final at the trials, Henry Tillman defeated Mike Tyson twice to make the team and capture a Gold medal. In 1991, Tillman faced Tyson as a pro and was knocked out in the first round.

The 1984 U.S. team enjoyed outstanding success at the Games, although somewhat tainted since the World's best didn't compete. They won 11 medals, 9 Gold, 1 Silver, and 1 Bronze. The ironic thing about that team is that one of its best fighters, Evander Holyfield, was the fighter who captured the Bronze. Holyfield was DQ'd for hitting New Zealand's Kevin Barry on the

break, knocking him out. The 1984 team also produced two all time greats in Pernell Whitaker and Evander Holyfield. The last U.S. Olympic boxing team to win multiple Gold medals was the 1988 team. The 1988 squad won 8 medals -- 3 Gold, 3 Silver, and 2 Bronze. This team is most remembered for junior middleweight Roy Jones losing a 3-2 decision to his Korean opponent in what was probably the worst decision in Olympic history. The decision cost Jones the Gold medal. Instead, Jones had to settle for the Silver, until years later when the Olympic committee presented him with the Gold when it was uncovered that the Korean judge who scored his bout took a monetary payoff. The Super Heavyweight final of the 1988 Games featured two future heavyweight champions. Lennox Lewis of Canada stopped Riddick Bowe in the second round to capture the Gold while Bowe took home the Silver. The 1988 team produced one all time great in Roy Jones.

Since 1988, the U.S boxing team has won only two Gold medals in the last three Olympics, Oscar De La Hoya in 1992 and David Reid in 1996. The 1992 team only won 3 total medals and the 1996 team won 6. The last team the U.S. sent to the Olympics in 2000 hit an all time low, being shut out of a Gold medal for the first time in 52 years. However, they did win 4 medals overall.

As we head into the 2004 Athens Games, the U.S. has a shot at possibly four medals. The fighters to watch are light heavyweight Andre Ward, middleweight Andre Dirrell, super heavyweight Jason Estrada, and lightweight Vincente Escobedo. There are now 11 weight classes since the light middleweight class was dropped, and the U.S. only qualified in 9 of them. After winning 42 Gold medals from 1908 through 1984, U.S. Boxers have only won 5 Gold medals since 1984, six if you count Roy Jones. We'll soon know if David Reid will remain the last U.S. Olympian to bring home the Gold.