There will be 284 amateur boxers in Beijing over the next month trying to live a lifelong dream. Eight will be trying to alter a nightmare which has already begun anew even before these Olympic Games have.

The United States has won only three gold medals in boxing over the past 20 years, a number so miniscule it has been exceeded not only by amateur boxing powers Cuba and Russia but also by Kazakhstan (four) and tied by Thailand. Now a new team of kids averaging barely 20 years old is in China trying to reverse what has been a slow decline in our Olympic fortunes in boxing amidst controversy and a near mutiny against tough-minded head coach Dan Campbell.

One long-time critic of Campbell's was Gary Russell, Sr., whose son Gary, Jr. collapsed in his room at the Games after a training run Thursday designed to help him make a 119-pound weight limit he had not reached in six months with the U.S. team in Colorado Springs. Never less than 125 pounds during that time, Russell was one of six U.S. boxers who all but mutinied against Campbell's strict demands and training methods. Now he's out of the Games, where boxing competition is set to begin Saturday, and serves as a reminder that once again U.S.A. boxing is more about controversy and collapse than medal count.

Campbell has been critical of at least six of the team's nine fighters and blames them for what grew into a near mutiny in June when three of the nine went home from Colorado Springs and failed to return as scheduled. Nineteen year old Luis Yanez was temporarily thrown off the team and labeled a "liar'' by Campbell during the affair. Ultimately he appealed and he was returned to the team amidst a growing public split between the athletes and Campbell.

"This is not really a team at this point,'' said Russell, Sr., his son's coach and a loud critic of Campbell's methods. He is one of at least a half dozen personal coaches who have privately trained their fighters in hotel rooms after the regular training sessions were finished in Colorado, pushing back hotel furniture to make enough room to prepare their young fighters without Campbell's knowledge.

Campbell's rejection of input from those coaches, who in many cases had been training the team's boxers for years, has been another aspect of the problems long plaguing U.S.A. Boxing, which is at the moment on probation by the USOC because of its two decades of medal failures, financial mismanagement and consistent problems with the way it runs the sport.

Yet despite all the troubles, which loomed once again Friday after Russell collapsed and failed to make weight not long after the 65-year-old Campbell had questioned his work ethic, two young Americans are believed to have a strong chance at a gold medal.

One, 20-year-old welterweight Demetrius "Boo Boo'' Andrade, is typical of today's U.S. amateurs. Unlike the Cuban team and many of the Eastern Europeans, the American team is filled with first-time Olympians who average only 20 years old. Andrade may be the best of them

and he has been aided in his medal quest with the banning of his top rival, Erislandy Lara, the Cuban gold medalist thrown off their team after a failed defection attempt.

The one exception to the American team's lack of Olympic experience is 24-yerar-old flyweight Rau'shee Warren, who four years ago was the first American boxer eliminated from the Games. Now he's back after winning bronze at the 2005 world championships and gold last year as the first U.S. Olympic boxer since Davey Armstrong in 1972 and 1976 to compete in two Olympic Games.

"The timing for going pro wasn't right,'' Warren told RING Magazine recently. "My Mom and my coach pushed me to go for another Olympics. Now that I look back it would have been hard being a 17-year-old flyweight. They convinced me to go for another Olympics and they were right.''

While that departure from the norm in the U.S. is a good thing what is not is the continued demise of our bigger body fighters. For the first time the United States failed to qualify a fighter in the light heavyweight or super heavyweight divisions, meaning we had competitors in only nine of the 11 classes until Russell was forced to withdraw Thursday night.

Now that number is down to eight on the eve of the opening of the competition and the absence of Russell will only drive home the point so many of the personal coaches and at least six of our nine fighters kept making that something is wrong with a system that insists the U.S. pick its team a year in advance of the Games and then live together for nearly a year in Colorado Springs while being coached only by Campbell and his staff and living far from home and the familiarity of their individual coaches.

This is not the case with our Olympic swimmers, gymnasts or track and field stars nor is it the norm for our competitors in less well known sports. While they may compete together at times, most train on their own with only occasional trips to Colorado Springs, where the U.S.O.C. maintains its headquarters and national training center.

Yanez left that camp in June to go home for a brief break but did not return until he was threatened with expulsion from the team. He claimed he had stayed behind to care for his sister's four children while she was in drug rehab. Campbell claimed Yanez was "a liar'' but lost his authority battle when Yanez won an appeal and was restored to the team under the dark cloud of a potential boycott by at least six members of the boxing team if their captain was not restored to the roster.

Now, on the eve of the opening competition on Saturday, the U.S. team has lost one of its nine qualifiers, Russell, and his collapse in his room after a training run in the humid and smog-filled air of Beijing seemed a sad symbol of what has now been 20 years of frustration and failures for the U.S. boxing team.

During the last four Olympiads the U.S. has won only three gold medals and was shutout in 2000 at the Games in Sydney. This year we have two fighters, Warren and Andrade, who are seen as likely medalists and possible gold medalists. But the team is made up of no one older

than 23, half of which are teenagers trying to erase what has become two decades of turbulence and disappointment. With Russell's withdrawal from the Beijing Games less than 48 hours before the Opening Ceremonies, it appears their difficult task just got a bit more daunting.