

LORDS OF THE RINGS

College athletes don the red, white and blue to battle for the gold, silver and bronze

BY DAN MILLER

ARIZONA STATE U.

ILLUSTRATION BY STACY HOLMSTEDT, ARIZONA STATE U.

PHOTO BY DAVID BLACK

AS YOU STRIDE DOWN THE TUNNEL, you feel the vibration emanating from the crowd of 80,000 fans roaring. It pulsates through your nervous system. Images from your life infiltrate your stream of consciousness. The moment of anticipation is intoxicating. Your Olympic fantasies always seemed so distant — a part of a future unknown.

That future is now.

For a select few premier college athletes in the country, that magical time will soon become theirs as they take their place in history along with other athletes who have marched behind the American flag during Opening Ceremonies.

But the honor of wearing the red, white and blue is not bestowed upon just anyone. Some are born with it; others achieve it through tireless dedication. But most would agree that it takes a special talent to become an Olympian.

"I think it's a long-term goal for everyone. It's just a matter of if it's a reality or not," says Tom Dolan, a junior at the U. of Michigan who is one of the top male swimmers in the United States.

Dolan, like a handful of other college athletes, is hoping to be in Atlanta on July 19, 1996.

As the current world-record holder in the 400-meter individual medley and the U.S. Swimmer of the Year for the past two years, Dolan already appears to have an inside track on making the cut. The five-time NCAA champion practices twice a day for a total of six hours to ensure that he stays in world-class condition.

With more than 20 individual records highlighting a monstrous list of achievements, one might wonder if an Olympic medal would make his résumé complete.

"I think so," admits Dolan, who became the first man to set three American records at the NCAA championships since Matt Biondi in 1987. "I've achieved a lot at a young age, and I think an Olympic medal is the biggest accomplishment in any athletic career. That would top it off."

Gym dandies

It seems every Olympics there's one athlete who has all of America's hopes and dreams firmly on his or her shoulders. This year, the eyes of the nation will be focused squarely on gymnast Shannon Miller. She captured America's heart by coming out of nowhere to win five medals in the '92 games at Barcelona, including silvers in the all-around and balance beam, and bronzes in the uneven bars, floor exercise and team competitions.

This time around, the U. of Oklahoma freshman is a little stronger, a little older and ready to make a run for the gold. The difference is, she won't be able to sneak up on the rest of the field. "The last time I was going in as kind of the underdog, and that was a position I was comfortable with at the time," Miller says. "But two or three years after, I had to go into competitions on top, which is a lot harder. You just have to go out and compete and not worry about which place you're in."

