Toniie Campbell’s Olympic dream came true; he won a bronze medal, but his coaching career is his gold

By Brittany Cruz-Fejeran

Sports Editor

It was the 13 seconds of his life.

In 13 ticks of stopwatch, Toniie Campbell won a bronze medal in 100-meter hurdles at the 1984 Olympics.

Today, 30 years later, he said he remembers every second.

Every breath, every step, every reason why he had invested himself.

“In a race you are a robot,” he said. “You have to have faith in what you are doing and control what is happening.”

As a teenager in Compton, Campbell said he played handball in the spring and football in the winter.

But he got tired of both sports and asked his parents if he could take a break.

He said no way.

“My father believed an idle mind leads to trouble,” Campbell said. “Keep your mind and body active as a way to keep away from the temptations of drugs and gangs.”

There were no idle minds in the Campbell house, or idle feet.

His friends were going out for track so he joined, too, even though he said he was the second slowest kid in his neighborhood.

“The reason I was not the slowest because the other kid was my little sister who was three years younger than me,” he said wistfully.

Campbell said he felt he was not strong or fast enough for any of the events, but team captain Curtis Perry urged him to try the high hurdles.

Campbell said Perry was wise. “I said, ‘Look, I’ll do the low hurdles,’” Campbell said. “but I am not doing the high hurdles because you are crazy if you do high hurdles.”

“Don’t be a punk,” Campbell said his coach told him.

Campbell staggred from the pack he found a high hurdle in his path.

In first place not his face on the hurdle, he instinctively jumped over it instead.

It was love at first flight.

He was a hurdle protégé and soon went from the slowest of the blocks to the fastest in Compton. Then he became one of the fastest in the nation.

Campbell was invited to Olympic tryouts. His coach told him he was the key to finishing in the top three of each heat.

Campbell was an Olympian...until he wasn’t.

The First Olympic Hurdle

In 1984 he made the Olympic team for a second time, only this time Campbell was invited to Olympic tryouts. His coach told him he was the key to finishing in the top three of each heat.

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World events overwhelmed the next two Olympic Games.

In 1979 the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan.

In protest, the United States and other countries boycotted the 1980 Summer Olympics hosted that year in Moscow.

“I realized the things that were going to happen to me were (out of my control),” he said.

Then the International Olympic Committee dangled an alternative before the U.S. athletes. They could go to Moscow, but not as Americans. They could represent the commune, rather than their country.

And if that was true, it was, got a whole lot weirder, Campbell said.

“The CIA found out about us,” he said. “They sent a letter to our leaders saying. ’You will not disgrace your president and you do your visas and passports will be cancelled.’”

None of the American athletes took that risk and they instead went to the Philippines to participate in the “Freedom Games” with athletes from other boycotting nations.

Campbell said politics and sports should never mix, but the politics of sports was as infused with politics as much as the Moscow Olympics.

He said it felt like a failed consolation prize.

“After that summer, I promised myself I would always be awake,” he said. “I would always try to take control of my future, my career.”

In 1984 he made the Olympic team for a second time, only this time Los Angeles Olympics boycotted by the Soviet Union.

Campbell said this does not make an athlete any less of an Olympian, but the 1984 Olympics lost luster when the Soviet Bloc nations stayed away.

With the Russians and several other countries not there, we were not allowed to compete against the best,” he said.

That was something taken away from us.”

The Final Olympic Hurdle

In 1988 Campbell made the Olympic team for the third time and traveled to Seoul, South Korea.

He returned home an Olympic medalist.

“Making a third team in Korea made it all make sense,” Campbell said.

“I got to fulfill my dream of being an Olympian and an Olympic medalist.”

His Olympic finale was nearly a catastrophe, he recalled.

There was confusion at the starting line and a runner inadvertently jumped the gun. Runners who had exploded out of the blocks were stopped and told there would be a restart.

Campbell said this was a dramatic blow for him because he had used lots of energy in that false start.

He returned to the starting line and was not completely reset when the gun fired again.

He got a poor start and trailed the field.

He remembers every second, every step and every hurdle.

Of the 90,000 people cheering in the stands, he said, he only heard the people most important to him.

Strategically placing them at each hurdle, he heard his coach give him a verbal cue to accelerate, his parents at hurdle four offered encouragement and his best friend Robert Gammon spurred him at hurdle seven because Campbell said he tends to slow at certain hurdles.

Despite the awful start, he rocketed from last place to the podium and a bronze medal.

“That was one of my proudest races ever because I should have come in last,” Campbell said. “I hit a gear that I had never known I had before.”

Bronze was his gold and Campbell was happy to be an Olympic medalist of any color, but he wondered how the race would have played out had things gone according to plan.

“It is nerve-racking. It is scary. It is exhilarating,” he said.

“In only last 13 seconds in real time, but it lasts a lifetime in the moments.”

His Olympic experience was the gift that keeps on giving, he said, and inspired him to help others feel it.

He continued his legacy as an Olympian by giving back to his sport.

The Coaching Hurdle

Following his retirement as a competitor in 1992, Campbell became head coach at USC.

In 2003 he became head coach at SCS.

He still continues to do camps, clinics and coaching.

He has mentored 17 Olympians and one Olympic medalist, and remains flush with the Olympic spirit.

“People may think of Olympians as selfish in that Olympians probably think this is all about me, this is my time,” Campbell said. “But becoming an Olympian changes your life forever.”

Campbell’s wife Deborah said he enjoys helping young athletes.

“Get personally involved,” she said. “It is a passion he has and, for as long as he can, he is going to keep going back.”

Deborah Campbell said her husband works seven days a week sharing his wisdom with other athletes.

He also volunteers for charity organizations like Athletes for Education and his own Prodigy Coaching.

“He tries to be at home more for his family, but it is who he is,” she said. “It is what he does. We all support it and America needs people willing to give their time like that.”

Campbell said one of his athletes is the most proud of is Scout Bassett, who competed in the 2016 Paralympic Games in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil.

She got 10th in the long jump and 5th in the 100-meter dash.

Campbell said she did outstanding for her first big race and told her he did not place in his first race, either.

Bassett said Campbell is inspiring.

“I would never have believed in myself in the way I do now if it were not for Coach Toniie,” Bassett said. “I have never felt that kind of faith from a coach who really believes I can do amazing things.”

Bassett said Campbell pushes her hard, but keeps it enjoyable.

“One thing I want people to know about him is that he is so much fun,” she said. “Training is intense and there is a lot of stress, but he loves that he just makes it fun.”

Bassett went on to win bronze medals for both the 100-meter and hurdles at the 2017 World Para Athletics Championships in London.

Maya Nakanishi, another athlete under coaching, said Campbell won a bronze medal in the long jump at the Championships as well.

She said he hopes to coach more champions, including his SWC athletes.

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“The ride is still happening. It is going to take me until my last breath.”