

Pool Blog Umeh, Stella

SPORTS

Golden moment for Umeh at Commonwealth Games

By JIM REID
Special

VICTORIA — If Stella Umeh's mother hadn't been "a lousy driver," Umeh might never have been here to be crowned gymnastics queen of the Commonwealth.

But thanks to her mom's suspect

driving skills, Umeh negotiated a long and often bumpy road that brought her to Memorial Arena and the 15th Commonwealth Games, where she dazzled her fans and opponents alike with a Herculean four-medal performance.

"We got lost and went into a gym club to ask for directions," Umeh

recalled of that fateful wrong turn made into the Gymnastics Mississauga parking lot 13 years ago. "We saw all these bodies flying about and swinging. My mother said, 'Put her in!' and I'm still swinging."

Umeh, 19, was really swinging during three days of Games competition in team, all-around and indi-

vidual events in which she grabbed two gold medals and two silvers.

Her string of rousing performances, which captured the hearts of a capacity crowd and millions of television viewers, provided a storybook finish to Umeh's brief, but magnificent international career.

It was on the Commonwealth Games stage, four years ago in Auckland, that Umeh made her astonishing debut. Flown in as a last-minute replacement because of injuries to two other gymnasts, Umeh helped Canada win team gold.

It seemed fitting that the Victoria Games should act as Umeh's swan song, after she had earlier announced her intention to retire from international competition and concentrate on her broadcasting and drama studies UCLA.

"Stella's been through a lot of ups and downs. She deserves every minute of this," coach Alex Bard said softly as his star athlete was given a lengthy standing ovation.

"I'm excited and sad about retirement," an emotional Umeh said. "Some people think I make it look easy. But I don't want to keep going if there's nothing left to give."

Umeh reserved special praise for Bard, who has been her coach, surrogate parent and friend for the past 13 years. "The only thing he ever said to me is 'do the best you're capable of doing.' I hope I did."

Umeh's assault on the medal podium began Saturday when she and teammates Jaime Hill and Stacey Galloway of Mississauga, and Lisa Simes of Ajax combined to win silver in the team event.

The Canadian quartet compiled a score of 113.650. With Umeh winning three of the four events — she was third on the floor — it took a twist of fate for Canada to surrender gold to England. The Brits scored 114.225 points, while Australia claimed the bronze by finishing right behind Canada with 113.625 points.

But a courageous performance by Galloway, 18, turned the Canadians' finish into pure gold and will likely stand as one of the defining moments of these Games.

Despite suffering a dislocated knee during her floor routine, Galloway gamely went ahead with her uneven bars routine even though she knew she would have to endure an excruciatingly painful dismount.

But Galloway chalked up an impressive 8.80 on bars and — even though she couldn't compete in the final event, beam — her effort was enough to secure silver for Canada.

Umeh remained unstoppable in Sunday's individual all-around competition, repeating her previous day's performance with three first-place finishes (vault, bars, beam) and another third-place finish on floor. She totalled 38.400 for her first gold medal of the tournament, ahead of Australian Rebecca Stoyel (38.037).

Simes placed fourth, and Hill, just 15, scored a third on bars and achieved a 10th all-around finish.

Umeh continued to dominate on Monday's individual finals, striking gold for a second time on vault.

Stoyel outduelled Umeh for gold



Photo by Peter Thompson

Gold medalist Stella Umeh gets a hug from sister Stacey.