

Stella's

golden games

*Paul Bog - UMESH STELLA
New News Aug. 24, 1994*

By JIM REID
Special

VICTORIA — They are the newest Golden Girls of the Commonwealth.

Stella Umeh and Lisa Alexander struck the motherlode and stole a nation's heart this week with four golden performances at the 15th Commonwealth Games in Victoria.

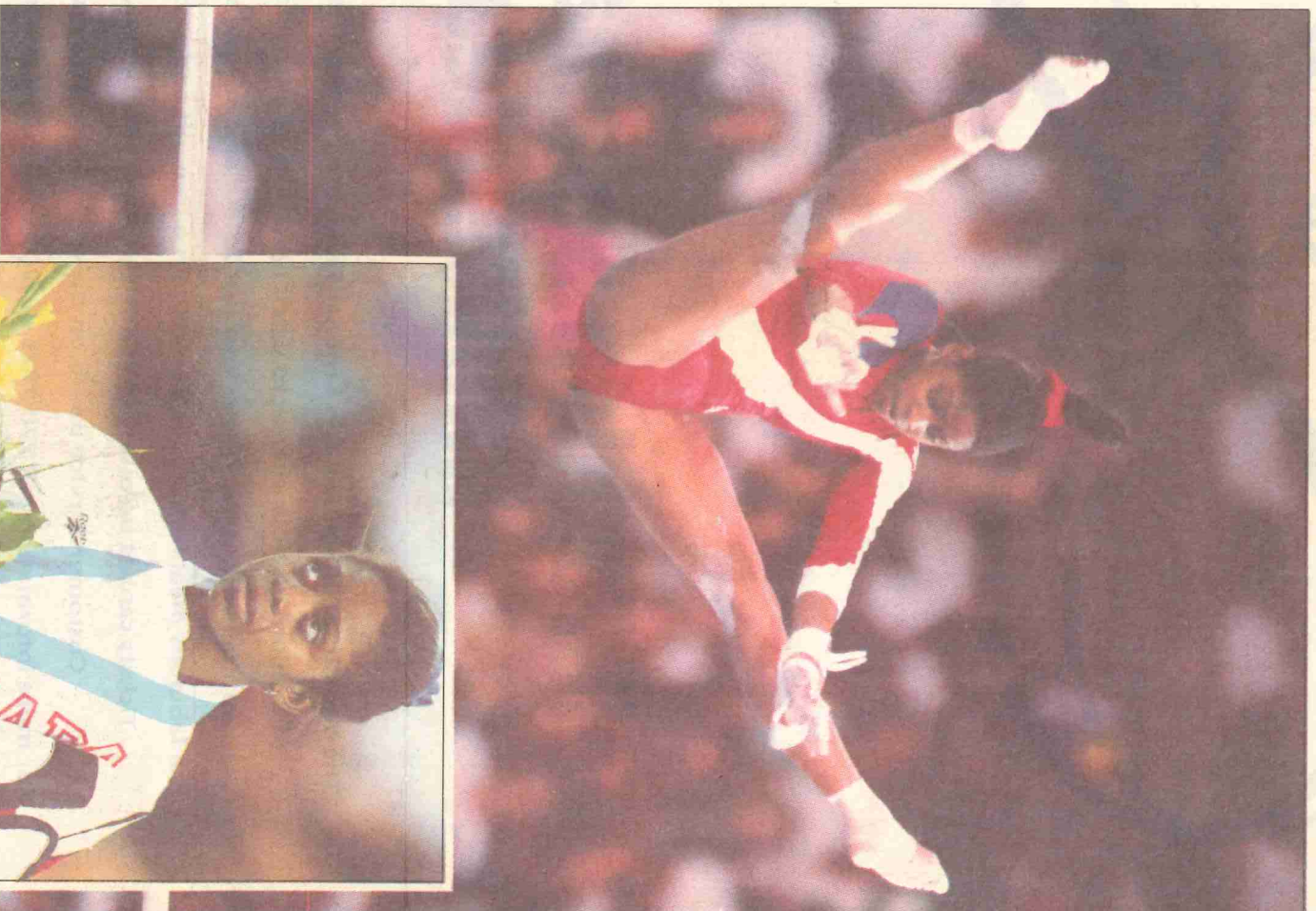
Umeh, taking one final bow on the world gymnastics stage before retiring from international competition to pursue her education, was at the peak of her dazzling form and nailed down the women's all-around title on Sunday afternoon. It was one of four medals she claimed during three days of competition at midtown Memorial Arena, along with a gold in the individual vault final and silver medals on the uneven bars final and in the women's all-around team competition.

The other members of the medal-winning Canadian team were 1994 national champion Stacey Galloway of Mississauga and two gymnasts who represent Canada's international future in the sport, Mississauga's Jaime Hill and Lisa Sines of Ajax.

Alexander, who spent many years in the shadow of Olympic and Commonwealth champion Sylvie Prechette, finally took her place in the synchronized swimming spotlight with back-to-back gold medal performances that enthralled a capacity crowd at Saanich Commonwealth Place on Monday afternoon. Alexander dazzled judges and spectators alike with her highly-energized and powerfully-executed solo routine, then combined just 90 minutes later with Mississauga-born Erin Woodley to give a spectacular duet performance.

Alexander and Woodley continued a tradition that has seen Canadian swimmers win every gold medal since synchronized swimming was introduced as a Games sport in 1986.

"I've never experienced anything like this. I'm so lucky to be able
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Mississauga's Stella Umeh flew through the air with the greatest of ease as the Gymnastics Mississauga member led Canada to a team silver medal in gymnastics, gold on vault, silver on uneven bars, fifth place on balance beam and gold all-around.

Photos by Peter Thompson

Mississauga's athletes shine at Victoria games

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to enjoy something like this in my home country," Alexander gushed after being presented with her second gold medal by the woman whose mantle she inherited — Sylvie Prechette.

"I hope people won't forget about Sylvie because she was a great ambassador for the sport," Alexander said. "But I've paid my dues long enough. It's nice to be on top. This is a great, great feeling."

The Victoria Games have provided Umeh with an opportunity to renew many of the friendships she

made during a brief but spectacular international career that began at the 1990 Commonwealth Games in Auckland, N.Z., where she helped win the team gold medal.

But, more importantly, these Games allowed Umeh to forget the disappointments of the past year, in which repeated injuries sabotaged her bid for a place on Canada's world championship team.

"I'm so excited that I finally had two days in a row of my very best," a broadly-grinning Umeh told reporters after winning her second gold medal.