

Olympians in Houston: Their Success Is Houston's Success

By Asit Shah



Zina Garrison became one of the first African American women tennis players to compete at the global level. Now, through the Zina Garrison Academy, she gives back to her community by providing a space where young people can flourish through tennis.

Photo courtesy of the Zina Garrison Academy.

A fifteen-year-old swimmer for Team USA, Michael Phelps, gave it his all in his Olympic debut, taking fifth place in the 200-meter butterfly in the 2000 Summer Games in Sydney, Australia. Although Phelps did not stand on the medal podium that year, he became the most decorated Olympian in history, amassing 28 medals, 23 of them gold, by the time he retired from competition in 2016.¹ Phelps's first Olympics was also an important moment in my life — it was the first time I watched the Olympic Games. Surrounded by my family in the comfort of home, I remember, as a six-year-old, watching Sydney open its doors to the world. By the end of the twenty-seventh Olympiad, I begged my parents, “May we pleee-ase go to the Olympics?” Reminiscing on this naïve question after the 2016 Summer Games inspired me to explore the connection between the Olympics and Houston.

Since 2000, I have religiously cheered on Team USA for nine summer and winter Olympics. Every Olympic Games in recent decades has attracted more athletes, more viewers,

and, consequently, the games have become more expensive for the host city and country. Even with widespread criticism towards the seemingly inverse relationship between the price tag for hosting the games and the return on investment, athletes worldwide continue to expand our understanding of humanity's physical and mental capabilities. In addition to their athletic feats, an Olympian's post-Olympic endeavors offer a unique perspective for understanding the economic and cultural return on investment in local communities like Houston.

In the most recent summer games in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, Michael Phelps won six medals in his final Olympics, and gymnast Simone Biles quickly won the world's admiration after earning five medals in her first Olympics. Simone's infectious smile and success sparked my curiosity to explore her journey to the Olympics. Among the stories in her autobiography, *Courage to Soar*, one fact stood out—Simone grew up and trained in and around the Houston metropolitan area. But she is not alone. Stories about the athletic



Zina Garrison, Lindsay Davenport, Venus Williams, Monica Seles, Serena Williams, and Billie Jean King at the Sydney Olympics in 2000.

Photo courtesy of Zina Garrison Academy.

careers of more than seventy former Olympians with ties to the Houston region reveal that, for many, their post-competitive lives immensely contributed to the development of sports culture in their respective communities.² Examining what motivated a few of Houston's Olympians to prosper and create a positive long-term impact on the community's sports culture reveals how their outreach helps.

From Training at MacGregor Park to Impacting 30,000 Hearts

At the tender age of forty-two, Mary Garrison was concerned that she had a tumor. To everyone's surprise, instead, on November 16, 1963, the Garrison family welcomed their seventh child, Zina. Despite her parents intentionally choosing a name that begins with the letter "Z" to signify the last addition to their family, Zina's life reflects an ambitious drive to become "#1" in women's tennis. Today, Zina Garrison remains best known for being an Olympic gold and bronze medalist at the 1988 Summer Olympic Games in Seoul, South Korea.³

Much like her arrival to the world, this two-time Olympic medalist stumbled upon tennis unexpectedly. In the early 1970s, Zina's brother took her to MacGregor Park near the University of Houston for baseball practice. While waiting on a bench for her brother's practice to end, Zina recalls a man walking up to her and asking, "What are you doing sitting there and just using God's air?" Describing herself as a cocky kid, Zina responded, "Nothing." Her next response changed the course of her life. When John Wilkerson continued by asking if she wanted to try her hand at tennis, a simple, "Yeah," started her journey as one of the first African American women to compete in tennis at a global level.⁴

Born and raised in Houston, Zina credits Houston's athletic and demographic environments as influential factors in her journey. Having started the sport at the age of ten,



Houston's environment helped encourage Zina's transformation into a world-class athlete. She attributes this to the community at MacGregor Park and the diversity of people and talents found there.

Photo courtesy of the Zina Garrison Academy.



When Zina Garrison first spoke to John Wilkerson at MacGregor Park, she did not plan for tennis to become her life, but it has. She in turn inspires other young people to find their future through tennis, even if they never become professional athletes.

Photo courtesy of the Zina Garrison Academy.

Zina remembers MacGregor Park as an inclusive, diverse space that attracted top athletes from around the nation to live and train in Houston, calling the park “the mecca [of] everything.” The community-oriented atmosphere naturally invited some of Houston’s greatest athletes. Zina reflects, “I think about this a lot. The area I grew up in had a lot of great athletes. [Athletes] in football, basketball, and from all over the world would come to [MacGregor Park] and just hang out. It is one of those things where, back then, we all knew it was a great place to train, and we would tell other athletes and they would come and establish their lives. It was a lot to do with diversity.”⁵

Having future Olympians like basketball player Clyde Drexler as her classmate at Ross Sterling High School and track athlete Carl Lewis as a buddy at MacGregor Park, Zina found Houston to be a natural catalyst for her career. Under the watchful eye of Coach John Wilkerson, she earned the title as the number one junior in women’s tennis before graduating from high school. Zina then devoted her post-high school life to training for tennis opens in Australia, France, the United States, and Great Britain, and, eventually, the Olympics. With the 1988 Seoul Summer Olympic Games offering one of the first Olympic opportunities for women in tennis, Zina notes that the domestic competition was fierce, and she devoted all her energy and focus towards earning one of four spots. Zina recalls wanting to win so badly that once her nerves got the best of her, causing her to struggle to finish one of many qualifying tournaments that led her to the world stage. Training in Houston her entire career prepared her for a challenge like this. As she explains, “Even though it was hot, ... you felt like if you could deal with Houston, then you could deal with any situation in the world.”⁶

Facing Houston’s summer heat and overcoming her nerves were just the beginning; being a minority in tennis presented Zina with another set of challenges. She recalls that Houston had its share of cliques, ethnic and racial silos, and socioeconomic barriers, adding, “Back in my day, you knew where to go and where not to go.” Being an African American female in a predominantly white-male sport, Zina asserts that MacGregor Park’s inclusive community prepared the athletes for embracing and cherishing the diversity associated with competing globally. One of her greatest memories about competing in the Olympics was “the camaraderie of being able to meet with other athletes from all different places and sports,” and MacGregor Park, similarly, was always “very diverse. [It] was the center of everything where all different types of people came to play sports.”⁷ Clearly, Houston’s diversity was a catalyst in helping athletes grow and for fans to share their love for sports.

As her athletic career started to wind down in 1992, Zina, her coach John Wilkerson, and a few fellow athletes founded the Zina Garrison Academy to give back to the

Houston community. Today, twenty-six years later, the Zina Garrison Academy has touched the lives of over 30,000 young people through their mission, “To develop stars in the classroom, on the tennis court, and in the community by providing educational support, positive role models, parent education, and excellent tennis instruction.”⁸ As the founder and CEO of the academy, Zina hopes that her initiatives provide youth an opportunity to engage in tennis. She is also leading an effort to develop a multipurpose facility that aims to involve youth and adults in other sports as well.⁹

While winning on the Olympic stage put Zina “on the map,” it was Wilkerson’s investment in her journey and the support she received from Houstonians that inspired the creation of the Zina Garrison Foundation. When asked about her thoughts on Houston as a host for international events like the Olympics, Zina responded, “The Olympics are great. But what [comes] afterwards? I [do not] think anyone has conquered that [question] yet.” She continued by pointing out that so much money is invested in recruiting an audience and building the necessary infrastructure for the games that little remains to create a lasting impact for the host city’s post-Olympic athletic programs.¹⁰

Houston has an extensive sports history, and Zina notes, “There was so much winning in [her] time that the city was known for its athletes, many of whom have chosen to stay in Houston.” The problem is that when the city is ahead for a while, “People become complacent after wins.” Zina contends, as does Wilkerson who still plays tennis at MacGregor Park at the ripe age of seventy-one, that Houston “has to continue to grow” in its commitment to sports to host an event as notable as the Olympics. Zina Garrison’s journey from MacGregor Park to the Olympics inspired her to give back by becoming a catalyst for engaging



Timothy Wang (left) is the co-founder of the Houston International Table Tennis Academy (HITTA). By providing a space where Houston-area table tennis students can train, Timothy Wang and HITTA keep future talent from going elsewhere, as he did early in his career. Photo courtesy of author.

the community in tennis. For the Olympic community, her post-Olympic career hits the quintessential aspiration of all Olympians: “to contribute to building a peaceful and better world by educating youth through sports practice without discrimination of any kind and in the Olympic spirit.”¹¹

Coaching the Next Generation of Table Tennis Olympians

When most of us think about the Summer Olympics, prominent sports come to mind, such as gymnastics, track and field, and swimming. In the 2016 Olympics in Rio de Janeiro, over 10,000 athletes competed in twenty-eight sports.¹² Timothy Wang is making his mark in a sport similar to Zina Garrison’s tennis, only his version of the game uses smaller balls, paddles, and a significantly smaller court. Timothy Wang, born to Taiwanese parents in Houston on August 17, 1991, competed in table tennis at the 2012 Summer Olympics in London, United Kingdom, and in Rio de Janeiro in 2016.¹³



Timothy Wang (left) offers classes to a wide range of students, from those who just want to improve their game to those who have the promise to be future Olympians. Photo courtesy of author.

When I set out to find Olympians, I was surprised to learn that athletes from Houston compete in table tennis. So, naturally, my first question to Timothy was, “How did you get involved in table tennis?” He explained that table tennis is a popular sport among Asians, and with many Asian cultures being family-centric, his family used table tennis as an outlet to spend quality time together while exercising their bodies and minds. While his parents and two older brothers actively played the sport, Timothy was not originally a fan. He began to enjoy table tennis around the age of sixteen, when he started to play for his own enjoyment rather than as an obligation to his family. Timothy’s newfound passion for the sport helped accelerate his table tennis career and began his journey to national and international competition.¹⁴

Because Houston’s interest in table tennis was limited at the time, most of Timothy’s early training took place at the Houston Table Tennis Association (HTTA). To be globally competitive, Timothy moved to California and continued his professional training. His transition to a professional competitor marked a defining moment in his life. He shares that “many Asian children know [that there] is a lot of pressure” in their family to do well in school rather than in extracurricular activities like table tennis. To Timothy’s surprise, his family supported his sports pursuits. His father encouraged him to continue and “believed that you do not always have to do everything in the conventional way.” With the support of his family, Timothy successfully competed for a spot on the United States National Team and, afterwards, competed against the Canadian National Team for one of four spots allotted to the North American continent at the 2012 Summer Olympic Games in London.¹⁵

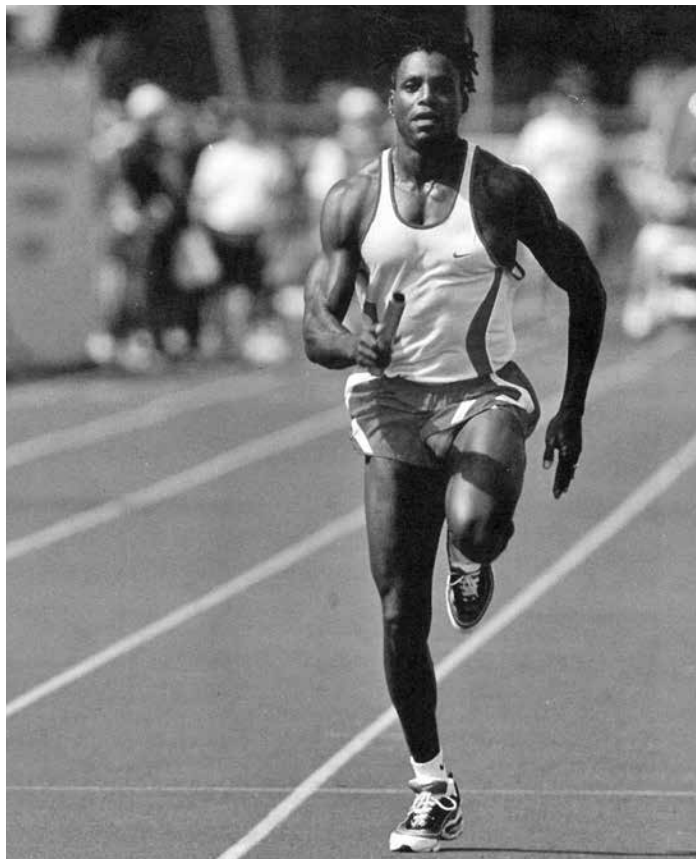
Although Timothy did not earn a medal at the 2012 or the 2016 games, his post-Olympic contribution to Houston is remarkable. In 2016, Timothy co-founded the Houston International Table Tennis Academy (HITTA) in Katy, Texas. The academy facilitates training for over sixty students every day of the week, a number that is “totally unheard of in Houston.” Timothy’s goal for the 11,000-square-foot facility is to bring out the best in Houston and to provide the next generation an opportunity to learn and play table tennis competitively. Having had an accomplished career in table tennis, he observes that local “interest [in table tennis] is rising.” As with any niche endeavor, however, overcoming the struggle to find funding is key in proactively nurturing the next generation of table tennis Olympians. Timothy’s persistence and entrepreneurial spirit have already transformed the sport’s landscape by providing a facility for youth and adults to learn table tennis.¹⁶

Among those who have been positively impacted by HITTA is Thuan Dao, a biology student at the University of Houston (UH). Thuan started the Table Tennis Club at UH and discovered that the university’s diversity was so remarkable that you “never know who is actually a [professional] or [an amateur] at table tennis.” Over time, he explains, “the club grew and got bigger, [motivating] me to step it up and become more competitive. After a quick Google search [for table tennis in Houston], I found the perfect table tennis club [led] by the best player in Houston, Olympian Timothy Wang. [HITTA] provides the resources that gives an edge to

any player of any age and skill range. This facility [has] not only sharpened my skills, but it [has] turned my hobby of table tennis into a passion.”¹⁷

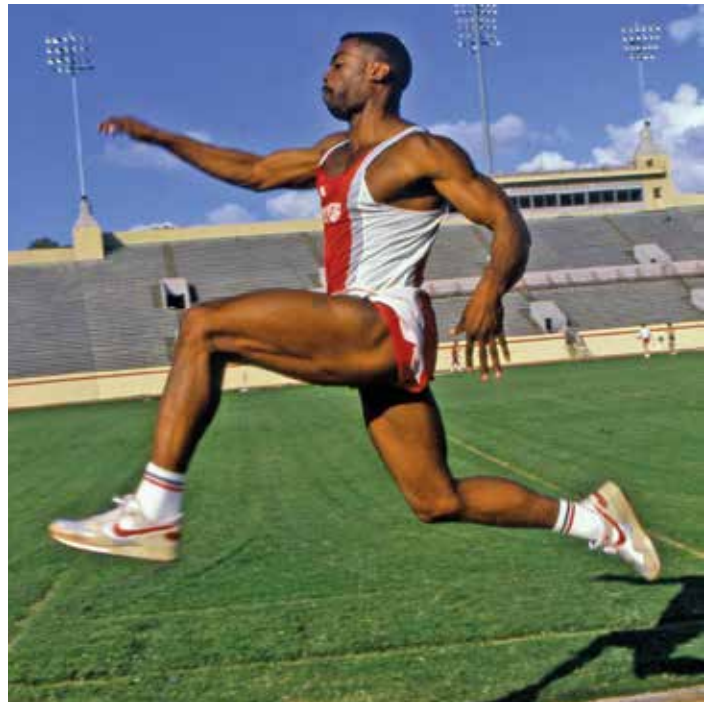
Much like the role that HITTA played in helping Thuan grow his passion, Daniel Nguyen also realized his talent for table tennis. An Tran, Daniel’s mother, shares that their family’s journey with table tennis originally started as an after-school activity for both Daniel and his older brother, Michael. After moving from Minnesota to Texas, the Tran family enrolled Daniel and Michael in classes at HITTA. Timothy is convinced that Daniel will likely grow up to compete in the Olympics since, at only nine years old, he is already nationally ranked among table tennis players in his age group.¹⁸

Similar to Timothy, the Tran family hails from an Asian country, Vietnam. Mrs. Tran states that while both of her children are involved in table tennis, the sport can be expensive and time-consuming, critical hurdles that can hinder academic performance. Even though the boys were born in the United States, An’s concern represents a struggle many Asian Americans face: balancing the expectation of competitive academic performance and the hope that their children pursue their non-academic interests freely and wholeheartedly. As many families face similar concerns at HITTA, Timothy’s journey provides parents and children alike a source of mentorship and guidance.¹⁹



Carl Lewis ran his last race in 1998 in front of approximately 17,000 fans at UH’s Robertson Stadium, where he began his college athletic career. He won nine Olympic gold medals and one silver. At the 1992 Olympics, the U.S. 4x100 meter relay team of Michael Marsh, Leroy Burrell, Dennis Mitchell, and Carl Lewis set a world record at 37.4 seconds.

Photo courtesy of the Houstonian Yearbook Collection, Special Collections, University of Houston Libraries.



In 1986, Leroy Burrell broke UH’s freshman long jump record held by Carl Lewis when Burrell leaped 26’9” at a dual meet against UCLA. As a senior in 1990 he won the NCAA indoor long jump title for the second time with a 27’ leap. He won gold at the 1992 Barcelona Games in the 4x100 meter relay with Michael Marsh, Dennis Mitchell, and Carl Lewis.

Photo courtesy of UH Alumni Association.

Timothy’s fondest memories competing in Houston are limited to a few early matches in 2009. Growing up in Houston in a Taiwanese family provided a support system that enabled him to reach the Olympics, the highest stage for a professional table tennis player. While he is currently undecided about his pursuit for the 2020 Summer Olympics in Tokyo, Japan, he remains involved in the sport through his local efforts to grow HITTA. As a two-time U.S. Olympian, three-time U.S. National Men’s Singles Champion (2010, 2012, 2013), two-time U.S. National Men’s Doubles Champion (2011, 2012), and a 2015 North American Men’s Singles Champion, Timothy hopes to see the club produce “a lot of international athletes as well as many more American national team members.” With over eight full-time instructors at the facility, Timothy reflects that if this had been accessible during his training years, he would not have moved to California for advanced training. He states, “[The facility] would have made things a lot easier for me [by] having my family around to support me and make sure my day-to-day operations ran smoothly.” Like Zina’s contribution to Houston, Timothy’s journey is a reflection of how the Olympic Games directly contribute to building sports communities locally.²⁰

Answering Zina’s Question: What Comes after the Olympics?

Thirty-two years after the modern Olympics began, Houston sent its first known athlete to the Olympics. Creth Hines, a competitor in the men’s javelin throw, attended the 1928 Summer Olympics in Amsterdam, Netherlands. Since then, both Houston and the Olympics have grown. As of 2017,

Houston is the fourth-largest city in the United States with over ninety languages spoken here. Houston has hosted the Super Bowl three times and is home to more than five professional sports teams. The nine-county Houston Metropolitan Statistical Area's GDP in 2016 was \$478 billion, larger than the GDP of Austria or Saudi Arabia.²¹ The Summer Olympic Games have grown to include more than 10,500 athletes, facilitated a growing list of sports disciplines, and garnered more than three billion television viewers, all the while becoming increasingly more expensive to produce.²² With Houston as an economic powerhouse and the Olympic Games as a catalyst for bringing the world together to advance the human condition, it seems natural to ask, "How have the Olympics impacted Houston?"

Zina and Timothy are not the only Olympic athletes giving back to the Houston community. Leroy Burrell, who won a gold medal at the 1992 Barcelona games, is entering his twentieth year as the head coach of UH track and field.²³ He has led UH to thirty-two conference championships and coached sixty-nine NCAA All-Americans. Carl Lewis, one of the most decorated track and field Olympians of all time, competed in four Olympics, winning ten medals, nine of them gold. Today he is in his fourth season as a UH assistant coach, training the next generation of Olympic athletes at his alma mater, where he and Burrell trained under Coach Tom Tellez.

Simone Biles, who competes as a professional gymnast, founded World Champions Centre (WCC) with the support of her parents, Ron and Nellie Biles, in hopes of creating a world-class, accessible gymnastics facility near Houston. WCC offers classes in gymnastics, taekwondo, dance, and many other disciplines. To complement the lives of hopeful professional athletes, the facility hosts a homeschool program, "which is incredibly helpful when training at the elite level!" Simone shares that "gymnasts from all over the world come to WCC to visit and train," and she hopes to "see lots of gymnasts from Houston in the future representing both WCC and the United States." Simone men-



Four-time Olympian Carl Lewis with author Asit Shah at the University of Houston. Photo courtesy of author.

tions, "Everything that a gymnast needs to train at the elite level" can be found in Houston. Kelly Tolar, a social media specialist at WCC, adds that the multipurpose facility trains both men and women competitively. Because the time commitment is intense, Kelly's own daughter, who is competitively training in gymnastics, attends WCC's homeschool program where Simone's own teacher educates elite-level athletes. As people move from places as far away as Hawaii to train at WCC, Houston continues to grow as a hub of sorts for the sport.²⁴

Athletes and coaches with Houston connections have contributed to the development of first-rate competitors in other sports as well. Hakeem Olajuwon, Shannon Miller, Ken Spain, and more than sixty other Olympic athletes have also proactively given back to Houston's sporting community through coaching, establishing new businesses, performing charitable work, and, most importantly, serving as inspirations.

As Houston strives to host world-class sporting events like the Olympics, the city must consider the impact that veteran athletes have made and partner with them to extend the influence of their initiatives. The driving force behind athletes like Zina Garrison and Timothy Wang who continually reinvest in their communities extends beyond the altruistic urge to give back; it stems from the need to help their communities succeed, empower new generations to redefine what we as a species are capable of doing, and share their love for sport. When these athletes succeed, Houston succeeds.

Asit Shah is a passionate advocate for the Olympic Games and a proud member of the University of Houston Alumni Association's Senior 27 Honor Society. He graduated in May 2017 *summa cum laude* from the Bauer Business Honors Program with a BBA in management information systems and supply chain management with minors in energy and sustainability, finance, and marketing.



A gold medalist in the 1992 Barcelona Olympics, Leroy Burrell has coached at his alma mater, the University of Houston, for over twenty years. Photo courtesy of the University of Houston.