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The rush for gold in Beijing

Williams first Illini basketball player to reach Olympics

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After averaging six points per game as a freshman, winning a gold medal was the furthest thing from Deron Williams' mind. Sure, Williams led the Big Ten in assists per game, but he was far from being a proven NBA player.

The point guard was more concerned with winning Big Ten championships and NCAA tournament games. But then Williams was named preseason Big Ten Player of the Year prior to his junior season. And then "15-points-down-to-Arizona-with-four-minutes-remaining" happened.

Then came a close national title loss to an NBA-loaded North Carolina roster. Then came the Utah Jazz with the No. 3 overall pick in the 2005 NBA Draft. Now, Williams will head to Beijing and attempt to bring home gold.

Williams was one of 12 players named to the USA Basketball team to represent the U.S. in the 2008 Beijing Olympics. His selection comes from a field of 33 players by the USA Basketball Executive Committee.

"It's an honor for me to be on this team and an honor for me to represent my country in the Olympics," Williams said. "I've always dreamed about doing playing in the Olympics, growing up watching the Dream Team and watching them get a gold medal. I'm just thrilled to death to have the opportunity and the privilege to play on this team and look forward to winning the gold medal."

The Utah Jazz point guard will be the first Illinois basketball player to participate in the Olympics.

"We are thrilled for Deron; this is a tremendous honor," Illinois coach Bruce Weber said in a press release. "He began participating with USA Basketball while he was here and has been working his way up the ladder to get to this point. I know it has been one of his long-term goals to make the U.S. Olympic Team and help try and lead his country to a gold medal.

"He has the desire and ambition, and that is just as important in international competition as



DOUGLAS C. PIZAC THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

Utah Jazz guard Deron Williams answers questions after being named to the U.S. Olympic basketball team during the NBA team's news conference Monday in Salt Lake City. Teammate Carlos Boozer will also play on the U.S. team while teammate Andrei Kirilenko will play for Russia.

talent, to have a makeup of guys who are willing to give their time and effort, who want to be there and most importantly want to win. I know that Illini fans will now watch the Olympics with even more interest. It is a great source of pride to have one of our own competing on the world's biggest stage."

Williams helped Team USA qualify for the 2008 Games when

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DERON WILLIAMS,
Former Illini guard, Team USA Basketball

he earned a gold medal on the U.S. team in the FIBA Americas Championship 2007. He also played on the USA under-18 team at the FIBA Americas Championship prior to his freshman season at Illinois and on the USA under-19 team prior to his sophomore season with Illini teammate Dee Brown.

"The 12 players selected have incredible talent, and more importantly, we think this team has excellent leadership;

great versatility and balance; and very good chemistry, which are critical parts in building a great team," said Jerry Colangelo, direc-

Dream Team '08?

Others named to the United States Olympic squad:

Carmelo Anthony (Denver Nuggets); Carlos Boozer (Utah Jazz); Chris Bosh (Toronto Raptors); Kobe Bryant (Los Angeles Lakers); Dwight Howard (Orlando Magic); LeBron James (Cleveland Cavaliers); Jason Kidd (Dallas Mavericks); Chris Paul (New Orleans Hornets); Tayshaun Prince (Detroit Pistons); Michael Redd (Milwaukee Bucks); and Dwyane Wade (Miami Heat).

Duke coach Mike Krzyzewski will coach Team USA in the Summer Games which run from Aug. 8-24.

tor of USA Basketball and UI graduate, in a press release. "I believe this team is a team all Americans can and will be proud of."

The former First Team All-Big Ten player is a budding star in the NBA. Williams averaged 18.8 points and 10.5 assists per game — third in the NBA — in his third season with the Jazz on his way to being named to the All-NBA Second Team.

Williams was a consensus second team All-American after leading the Illini to a 37-2 record and a national runner-up finish in his final season at Illinois. Williams also holds the Illinois single-season assist record with 264.

The U.S. will begin preliminary round play against host China on Aug. 10. Team USA hopes to reclaim its international dominance after finishing in a disappointing fashion at the 2004 Olympics, taking the bronze medal in Athens. Before 2004, the U.S. had won each gold medal since 1992, when NBA players were first allowed to compete in the Olympics.

"I feel with the team this year, it's going to be tough to beat us," Williams said. "The way we came together and meshed together last year in such a short amount of time was great, and we'll just look to build on that. The only thing on our mind is winning the medal. Anything less would be disappointing to us, to the fans, everybody."

Williams is the most decorated player in Illinois history and will attempt to become the first Illini to add a gold medal to his trophy collection. He said if it happens, it might overtake his final season at Illinois as his greatest memory.

"(The Final Four) was one of the best experiences of my life, but having the chance to represent your country and compete at the highest level possible, you can't even imagine what it's going to feel like. I've heard stories of how special the opening ceremonies are, so you're really not going to know until you get over there. But definitely I put winning a gold medal up there with winning an NBA championship. It's that special."