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THE ATLANTA  OLYMPICS

## A Full Circle to Gymnastic Glory

By Christopher Clarey  
*New York Times Service*

ATLANTA — Three months ago, Ioannis Melissanidis was running through the streets of his native Thessaloniki, Greece, with the Olympic torch in his hand and Olympic dreams in his head.

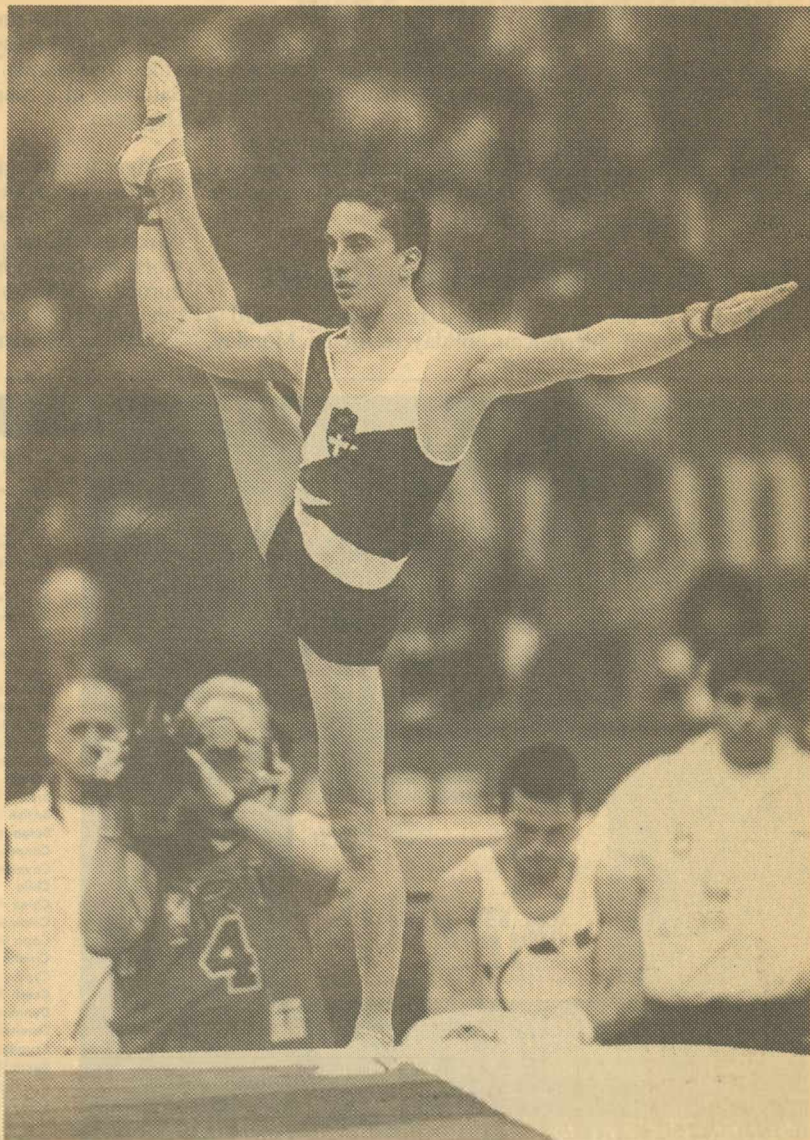
Those dreams were realized Sunday as he became the first Greek gymnast in a century to win an Olympic medal. He did it on the floor exercise, and what made it all the more stunning was that the color of the medal was gold.

Melissanidis, 19, had been one of those young athletes rooting for Athens when the centennial Olympics were awarded by the International Olympic Committee. But it hardly mattered. In his mind, he was in Athens anyway.

"Before I saluted the judges to start, I said to myself, 'I'm not in the United States. I'm not in Atlanta. I'm in Athens.' The people were so friendly. I felt like I could have been in Greece anyway."

Melissanidis, the son of a Thessaloniki bus driver, was not an unknown, at least not in gymnastics circles. He won Greece's first medal at a world championships in 1994, taking silver on the floor. But he failed to reach the finals in either of the last two world championships, and for all his talent, it appeared unlikely that he could stare down and tumble down an Olympic field that included the defending Olympic champion, Li Xiaoshuang of China, Vitali Scherbo of Belarus and Aleksei Nemov and Yevgeni Podgorny of Russia.

But though Li would take the silver and Nemov the bronze, the first event of the first night of individual event



*Agence France-Press*

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Ioannis Melissanidis of Greece, winning a gold medal in floor exercise.

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competition would not go smoothly for the favorites. Podgorny, perhaps the best pure tumbler in the world and certainly the boldest, was first up. At the end of his first pass, he attempted the most difficult element currently being used on the floor: a triple back somersault.

It was a courageous, slightly foolhardy move considering that Podgorny had missed the triple at last year's world championships and fallen on it at this year's world championships in Puerto Rico. Scherbo had cautioned him then to attempt something less risky. Podgorny ignored him, and he ignored such advice again Saturday night. The result: he landed short, stepped out of bounds and received only a 9.55 for his efforts.

The former world all-around champion, Grigory Misiutin, was next up and fell. Then came Scherbo, a three-time world champion on floor. More surprisingly, he struggled as well, making two major errors on tumbling runs and appearing to injure his left ankle on one landing. He finished the routine but received a very uncharacteristic 9.275.

After Nemov received 9.800, it was Melissanidis's turn. He mounted with a double layout and immediately punched off the floor into a front somersault. He dismounted with the same trick. In between, he did plenty of other difficult skills, but what is striking about Melissanidis is that his routine, unlike his opponents, flirts with dance.

One of the goals of this second-year medical student is to bring a level of expressiveness to men's gymnastics that it currently lacks. But expressiveness is nothing without difficulty, and his routine had plenty of that, too.

"I had to be perfect for Greece," he said.

After his score of 9.850, the only one left who could threaten him was Li, the Chinese who nipped Nemov for the men's all-around title in the Georgia Dome last Wednesday.

Li's routine was clean. His mount and

double-layout dismount had plenty of amplitude and solid landings, but in the judges' opinion, it was not quite enough. The score was 9.837, and Greece had its first gymnastics Olympic medal since Aristophoulos Petmetsas won a bronze on the horizontal bar and Ioannis Mitropoulos won gold in the rings in 1896.

The difference? Petmetsas and Mitropoulos really were in Athens when they won their medals.

### ■ Golden Oldie

Switzerland's Donghua Li, the oldest gymnast in the Olympics, won gold Sunday on the pommel horse in the men's individual exercises, the Los Angeles Times reported.

Li, 29, born in China before emigrating to Switzerland in 1989, scored 9.875 on the horse and defeated Marius Urzica of Romania and Alexei Nemov of Russia.

Yuri Chechi of Italy, unbeaten since 1992 in still-rings finals, kept his streak intact with a 9.887 performance, beating Szilveszter Csollany of Hungary and Dan Burinca of Romania, who tied for the silver medal with marks of 9.812.

Chechi had the highest men's score of the night.

Li was born in Chengdu, China, and was the Chinese pommel-horse champion in 1987. In 1988, he married a Swiss gymnast, Esperanza Friedli, and moved to Switzerland a year later, receiving his Swiss citizenship in March 1994.

"I am 29 years old and I've had many injuries, so this wasn't easy for me," he said. "But, I never gave up, despite all my injuries. This is an incredible accomplishment for me. My wife is expecting a child, so this medal is for my wife and my child."

Chechi, renowned in Italy for his near-fluorescent red hair as much as for his rings prowess, missed Barcelona because of an Achilles' tendon injury he suffered three weeks before the Games. This, then, was an opportunity he could not afford to bobble, and he Chechi kept his four-year winning streak intact with the highest men's score of the night.