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- CHICAGO
- COMEDY 23/6
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Sports: Gymnastics Results at Madison Square Garden

Posted March 1, 2008 | 07:19 PM (EST)

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Paul Hamm -- the Olympic All-Around Gold Medalist whose win in 2004 was tainted by legal maneuvers -- can officially announce his comeback is over. You can't keep coming back when you're in the lead.

At the Tyson American Cup held at Madison Square Garden on March 1, Hamm took the first major step towards putting an exclamation point on his impressive gymnastics career by dominating. He scored the highest totals in three events -- floor, parallel bars and horizontal bar -- and had such a commanding lead by the final event that delighted runner-up Alexander Artemev would have needed a nigh on impossible 18 point score to catch up. On the women's side, defending champ and media darling Shawn Johnson was edged out by fellow American Nastia Liukin (which sounds like a character from "Rocky & Bullwinkle") despite scoring the highest total on three out of four events. That was better than fellow defending champ Jonathan Horton, who fell during his favorite event -- high bar -- and was ranked 5th out of 7 by the end of the day.

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It all happened in a half-empty Madison Square Garden, which was the talking point of **my preview of the event**. At the Olympics a few months from now, you couldn't beg your way into an event like this. But today in the heart of New York City, it was a bummer to see so many empty seats.

But for anyone who can make it to one of the **gymnastics events leading up to the Olympic trials** in Philly this June, you're in for a treat. First, arrive early if you can because watching the practice is great fun. Anyone broadcasting these events would be wise to tape the practices and edit them into a preview of the competition. Watching all the world-class athletes casually dash off amazing moves is just dazzling. And when you pay attention, you can spot competitors who are working on a complex new element or struggling on a particular event. And did I mention the US men typically practice with their shirts off?

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I'm no marketing genius but sprinkling in practice footage during the meet and/or in a 15 minute set-up for the event would build up suspense (will a player who kept missing a maneuver on the horizontal bar miss it in competition?), anticipation for a major routines, and when it comes to the incredibly fit male gymnasts (most roughly college age) drive female viewership through the roof.

Gymnastics is an ideal sport for TV, where analysts can point out subtle flaws, let you know what routines have been simplified or made more complex at the last moment, give you closeups of the competitors so you can see the tremendous strain and agility they exhibit and generally make it absorbing for even casual fans. In person and seen even from very close seats, it's simply a thing of beauty. It's hard to imagine anyone who's ever been to Cirque Du Soleil not being wowed even more by these athletes and what they accomplish.

You definitely get a feel for their styles. American Raj Bhavsar only ranked six out of seven but he definitely loves attacking. He almost always pumped his fist after each event and when he did really well, Raj slapped his hands together in triumph, sending up a cloud of white powder (the substance used to keep their grips smooth on the equipment). After a great landing on the horizontal bar, Raj slapped his hands together and then slapped them on the sides of his legs for a double burst of excitement. It's like the canny trick of hammy actors who slap their hand on a thigh at the end of a big speech or funny moment that subconsciously prompts the audience to applaud and react. The crowd gave Raj one of the biggest roars of the day. However, his routine wasn't ranked high enough on difficulty to score high. When he only scored a 14.4, the crowd showed their loyalty by booing the judges loudly and longly for the first and only time of the day.

Artemev seemed just to delight in doing well and scoring so high. In comparison, Paul Hamm broke out in a smile of relief after almost every event. That makes me imagine he's one of the many competitors at the highest level who operate out of fear. They feed on the fear of failure rather than a blind belief in superiority, so that's where their adrenaline rush comes from -- not wanting to fail rather than "knowing" you'll succeed.

And defending champ Horton presumably took solace in his faith. He wears a medal his girlfriend gave him that says all victory comes from God. (I'm paraphrasing.) And he told me that one passage he always turns to for inspiration is in Philippians. (In my King James Version, it's Philippians 4:13, "I can do all things through Christ, which strengtheneth me."

I politely challenged him and said I believed that God doesn't care who wins the World Series, for example, so we shouldn't thank Him for that since He knows earthly glory isn't important. Do you thank God when you fail? Horton came up with a funny anecdote. When he had a terrible spill, slapping his face into the horizontal bar and collapsing to the ground with blood streaming down his face, Horton says he immediately thanked God that he was still alive. Today Horton had a rough meet, falling off the pommel horse and his favorite, the horizontal bar. So hopefully he'll find comfort in his faith and in knowing that the event he did the weakest on -- the horizontal bar -- is also his best event. Doing poorly on it is more frustrating but it also means it should be easier for him to improve on that in the next few months.

All the athletes will meet again in competition before finally gutting it out for the Olympic team in Philly this June and then moving on to Beijing. See them up close while you can: in Beijing they'll be fighting for gold medals and you'll need gold just to afford the tickets to see them.

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There is a possibility that gymnastics won't appeal to the people who drive pick-ups or anybody who isn't somewhat effete. The gymnastics meet didn't draw the 6 pack crowd to the Garden.

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During the Olympics, gymnastics is a HUGE primetime ratings draw, pulling some of the biggest numbers of the entire Olympics, which is of course one of the top-rated events every time it airs, dwarfing most other TV shows and specials. Men, women, old young, everyone is engrossed by gymnastics and swimming and in the winter olympics ice skating. Unlike, say, curling, which is just a novelty, there is no reason to think the audience for gymnastics and swimming et al couldn't be drawn to them outside the Olympics. Yes, they draw a LOT more women than most other sports, which is why they should be more appealing to networks and cable channels. They don't need to six pack crowd to fill Madison Square garden any more than WWE wrestling needs flocks of moms and little girls to fill the Garden when it appears. But over-priced tickets will keep anyone away from anything.

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