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Sports: Gymnastics Tyson American Cup Preview

Posted February 29, 2008 | 07:15 PM (EST)



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On Saturday, March 1st, the top US men and women gymnasts and some of the best from around the world will be competing at Madison Square Garden in the **Tyson American Cup**. Five months from now in Beijing (where the Olympics take place August 8 through August 24), you wouldn't be able to trade your first born child to get a ticket to an event like this. Not with two-time defending champ Jonathan Horton and new media darling and female defending champ

Shawn Johnson competing. But **go to Ticketmaster right now** and you can snap up a great seat front and center as of 18 hours before the meet. (Mind you, it'll cost more than \$200.00.)

Gymnastics is one of those sports that garner very little respect when Olympic gold isn't on the line. Swimming, track and field and gymnastics get little to no TV coverage most of the time. Collegiate and even world class events like this one play in arenas that are woefully unattended. Ice skating fares somewhat better (the major networks simply can't ignore the massive female audience that flocks to it). But nothing like the attention they deserve.

Because the Olympics are practically weeks away, **NBC is actually covering this event almost live from 1 p.m. to 3 p.m.** For three and a half years out of every four, that doesn't happen - usually at best you can watch a major gymnastics or swimming event days or even weeks later in a chopped up edited version long after the results are known. At two in the morning. Needless to say, repeats of sporting events long after the meet is over don't do well.

But you know how exciting it can be - during the Olympics you'll be cheering these people on like crazy. Catch them now or in **Philadelphia June 19-22** when they'll be competing for a spot on the Olympic team. You'll get to see world-class athletes competing at the highest level - and it's a heck of a lot easier to score a ticket than going to a post-season baseball game or the Super Bowl.

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So networks and ESPN may foolishly ignore the ratings gold they could garner from presenting a season of swimming, gymnastics and track and field properly. But the internet is doing an end-run.

Jonathan Horton jokes that his girlfriend will find him on You Tube and say, "Are you watching yourself again?" A meat and potatoes gymnast who doesn't offer up graceful lines but gets the job done, Horton can pump himself up by [checking out great routines from the past](#) or watching the competition. (Though he probably [doesn't like rewatching this crash](#) from the Winter Cup Challenge.) He also likes video games. "I've got Madden 2008, which is probably my best game," says Horton. He carries two game systems with him everywhere (but not Wii - "I don't like the Wii," he insists.)

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Paul Hamm (the Olympic all around Gold medalist in 2004) and his twin brother Morgan have been chronicling their road to the Olympics on [a fun website](#) complete with video practices and video diaries. Their voices may still be waiting to crack, but the Hamm brothers handle the spotlight with grace. Paul politely introduces himself to female gymnasts stretching nearby during a workout session and is the calm center of a scrum of journalists that is easily double the size of any crowd around the other athletes.

Fabian Hambuechen of Germany is a "crazily talented" gymnast says Horton with an elaborate [website of his own](#) (and a rather Teutonic one at that, with all sorts of stern, metal panels riveted to the bottom of the screen).

Raj Bhavsar of Houston is another great US hopeful. But he doesn't use techno, he prefers to scroll his iPod to motivational speeches. "I like to listen to other people telling me what I want to hear, rather than telling myself," says Bhavsar, who is often in the midst of self-help books and just finished [Dave Eggers' A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius](#).

Bhavsar, like the rest, is polite and easy with the TV crews and reporters. They're probably just delighted that with the Olympics edging closer that the media is paying attention again to one of the most demanding, beautiful and crowd-pleasing sports around. Soon, the spotlight will be intensely hot. But that's what they devote endless hours of practice for year in and year out when no one is cheering and even major events are sparsely attended.

Legendary coach [Bela Karolyi](#) readily agrees with me when I suggest that \$200 is too high a ticket price. "It could be lower," says Karolyi. "Especially in an Olympic year."

All the athletes talked about the excitement of appearing at Madison Square Garden, where most of them have never even attended an event, much less performed at. But when you can see Bruce Springsteen there for \$75, it seems foolish for a sport that is hungry for coverage and attendance to price itself out of the reach of casual fans. Yes, at the Olympics a gymnastics event front row ticket for \$200 would be priceless. But almost any time and anywhere else, it's just an empty seat.

They can't demand network coverage or tons of press. But they can fill seats with smarter pricing and at the very least fill up every empty spot with students from local areas. What better way to teach a new generation about the excitement of gymnastics?

That's a shame for these athletes who deserve packed houses year-round. Horton, for one, loves the high bar and the charge it gives a crowd. "Every time I do a release, they cheer louder and louder," says Horton about one of his flashiest and best events. "I love it."

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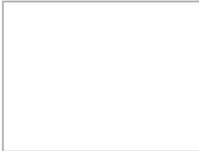
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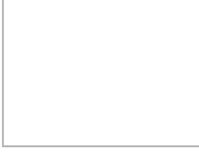
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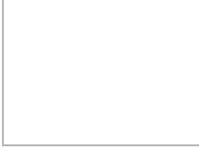
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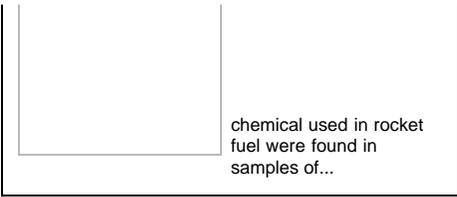
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