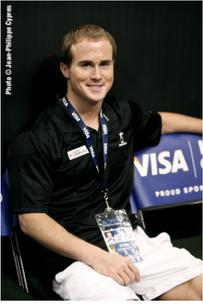


Written by Dwight Normile

Wednesday, 14 September 2011 13:30



Like many in the sport, I was saddened by the **Paul Hamm** incident that led to his termination as an assistant coach at Ohio State. It only takes one slip-up in the Internet age, especially when video is involved. So Hamm, whose gymnastics brilliance had always shone brighter because of his humility, was humbled even further.

While I don't condone his actions, I certainly will not judge him on one night of his life. As a writer, I have covered him since he and his twin, **Morgan**, dominated the age-group scene. When he showed up at the 2002 U.S. championships in Cleveland, he ran off with the first of three consecutive senior national titles.

At the 2003 Worlds in Anaheim, Hamm performed one of the best routines I've ever seen under the circumstances. After China's **Yang Wei** had already finished his all-around performance with a solid floor routine, Hamm needed to nail the high bar set that had betrayed him more often than not in the past. That's what I remember most. He went up and hit the best routine of his life, stuck his dismount, and became the first American male to win a world all-around gold.

"It was just an awesome feeling," Hamm said at the time. "I was finished, and I finally beat high bar."

A year later, at the Athens Olympics, he again completed his all-around with a clutch high bar routine. And even though his Olympic all-around title was clouded in controversy because of a scoring error, he carried on as best he could. He did nothing wrong, yet was robbed of the elation that usually comes with being Olympic champion. At his athletic peak, he disappeared from the sport after that.

Hamm, who turns 29 Sept. 24, was the most successful U.S. male gymnast ever, but I'll always

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appreciate his demeanor off the apparatus. No matter the situation, he answered questions honestly, respectfully and thoughtfully. He was never too busy, or too full of himself. That's what impressed me more than anything.

So when I think of Hamm, I will consider the total picture, not just one unfortunate evening. Because all we really learned from his incident with the police is that nobody is perfect. And nobody ever will be.

Paul Hamm was great for gymnastics. He was pivotal to the resurrection of a U.S. men's program that had nose-dived after its 1984 Olympic team victory. And if his comeback stalls and he never returns to the sport, that's how I will remember him.