

Written by Dwight Normile
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When **Paul Hamm** opted for retirement after winning the 2004 Olympic all-around gold, I was against it. Not that it was up to me, or anything. But I wanted to see what kind of winning streak he could put together, since he had won the 2003 worlds in Anaheim, too. The U.S. had waited a long time for an all-arounder of Hamm's caliber, and then circumstances drained his motivation right at his peak.

Through no fault of his own — but rather to a judging error — Hamm ended up in a very public debate regarding the legitimacy of his Olympic title. He was forced to defend his gold medal immediately after it was placed around his neck. So it was understandable that he might want to take a break.

I was pleased when he and his twin, **Morgan**, decided to come back for a run at 2008, even if Paul's chance at dominating the quadrennium in the all-around had already passed.

Then, after he worked himself back into national-title form by the spring of 2008, Hamm sustained a hand injury on parallel bars at the U.S. championships in Houston. A fractured fourth metacarpal ultimately aborted his return to the Olympics. And even counting his ill-fated fall from p-bars at those nationals, Hamm still logged a 93.450, 3.70 clear of second place.

China's **Yang Wei** won the 2008 Olympic gold with room to spare, scoring 94.575. Current world champion **Kohei Uchimura**, who fell twice from pommel horse, was next with 91.975. Hamm would have made it much more interesting in Beijing.

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I've often said that comebacks never surprise me, but Hamm's does. And it's one that I welcome. He'll be close to 30 by the summer of 2012, but perhaps a few years younger, physically. He hasn't trained non-stop since 2004 like many of his contemporaries. And even though only five gymnasts will make the 2012 Olympic team, Hamm's all-around ability should make him a lock.

Hamm recently quit his job at Breakwater Trading in Chicago and has been training a bit at his old gym, Swiss Turners, in West Allis, Wis., where coach **Andrei Kan** has been "just kind of busting my butt [laughs]." He's also reconciled with his old coach,

Stacy Maloney

, whom he left after the 2003 worlds. Hamm says he will train full-time at either Swiss Turners or the USOTC in Colorado Springs.

Hamm told me his goals for 2012 are to help the team and to contend in the all-around and on high bar. He's also aware of Uchimura's current dominance.

"He's one of the people that is motivating me right now, because I see him and I realize how darn good he is," Hamm told IG. "And it makes me want to beat him, because of what an accomplishment that truly would be. But he is very good. He's an awesome gymnast."

After 2012, Hamm says he can always go back to his job in Chicago. But for now, he's putting his gymnastics career first.

"That (job) will be there for me later on, and I don't know how much longer my body will last," said Hamm, adding that he'd like to return to competition at the 2011 Winter Cup. "So I'm not going to let this opportunity pass me by."

When I spoke with Paul at length about his comeback, his voice revealed an enthusiasm that was missing after 2004. Time seems to have healed a few wounds.

Welcome back, Paul. Give it your best shot.

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Read the complete interview with Paul Hamm in the next issue of IG.