

Golden

The Hamm twins are Olympic heroes, especially Paul—now the world's most famous gymnast because of a heated, after-the-fact controversy. And in January, the instant celebrities start classes at Ohio State. By Nicole Kraft

The phone rang for Paul Hamm in Loveland, Colorado. He was sitting alone in a hotel room, the television playing softly in the background. It was, quite likely, not his first interview of the day, nor would it be his last. His voice was tired.

For Morgan Hamm, an interview call came while he rode a tour bus with numerous other gymnasts from Colorado to Pittsburgh. "We're taking two days to do it," he said cheerfully about the trip. It was easy to picture him reclined in a high-backed seat, a cellphone to his ear, his head resting on the window as America passed by.

Road life is a weary one, and the Hamm twins—

Morgan is 30 minutes older—have been on one hell of a road trip this summer. The pair was performing as part of Rock 'n' Roll Gymnastics, which traveled from Colorado to Connecticut. And then there was that little excursion to Athens, Greece, for the Olympics, where Paul and Morgan each won a silver medal as key members of the U.S. gymnastics team. And Paul's awful vault landing, stunning comeback and unprecedented gold medal—followed by a raging international dispute over a judge's error and a massive media blitz.

But in late September, while enduring the hard travel of the Rock 'n' Roll tour, their thoughts were about home. Not their native Wisconsin, but their condo in Marble Cliff. They were thinking about eating burritos at El Vaquero, drinking a beer at Gordon

Biersch and cruising down High Street along the Ohio State campus, where they'll be sophomores come January.

"We are really looking forward to being home," admits Paul. "Sometimes you forget what it's like to sleep in your own bed."

Paul Hamm has chatted with Letterman and Leno (he liked Letterman better) and has appeared on "Today," "Good Morning America," "The Early Show," "The View" and countless local broadcasts. He has been written about in the *New York Times*, *Los Angeles Times*, *International Herald Tribune*, *USA Today* and *Sports Illustrated*, among others.

But instead of focusing on his phenomenal routines and spectacular comeback, interviewers grilled him on the controversy—whether he should keep his gold medal or give it to South Korean Yang Tae Young because of the scoring miscalculation caught after the competition. There were those who felt the true Olympic spirit would have dictated sacrificing the medal once the

verdict, the Hamm twins, especially Paul, will remain the most famous gymnasts in the world.

Paul is right-handed. He drives an Acura CL and his favorite color is green. He eats chicken Alfredo, watches "Friends" and "Seinfeld" and listens to hip-hop. His favorite book is *The Count of Monte Cristo* and he loves to play tennis.

Morgan is a southpaw and a fan of Texas Hold 'Em. His favorite food is steak, and in his spare time he makes pottery. He loves basketball, tennis and golf. His favorite movies and book are *Dumb and Dumber* and *Braveheart* and *The Da Vinci Code*, respectively. He dreams of driving a Cadillac Escalade.

"I'm more

made instant celebrities out of both twins. Numerous bits of trivia about them can be found on the Internet, and young girls scream and seek autographs at their personal appearances.

"We were doing a show on Sept. 24, and these girls started singing, 'Happy Birthday!'" Paul recalls. "I'm thinking, 'How did they know it was our birthday?' Then I realized, they know a lot about us now."



error was discovered. Paul, and others, respectfully disagreed.

"We got to the Olympics to determine a winner," he says. "I feel I won that competition. I played by the rules and I won by the rules."

"Most people are on my side," he says. "Not one person has actually come up to me and said something negative. Pretty much they just tell me 'Congratulations,' or 'Great job,' or 'Keep the medal.'"

As of mid October, after Paul, his coach (Ohio State's Miles Avery) and six attorneys traveled to Switzerland for a hearing before the Court of Arbitration for Sport, the conflict was still unresolved.

There's little doubt that no matter the

Making the rounds in Columbus after the Olympics: (Above, left) Paul (foreground) and Morgan Hamm at the West Broad Street California Concept Hair Design (owned by the parents of Paul's girlfriend); the line at Bank One Corporate Center on Polaris Parkway to get their autographs and (opposite page) at the Easton Panera Bread with fellow Olympian and former Ohio State gymnast Blaine Wilson (Morgan is at left, Paul, right).

relaxed," says Morgan. "I'm a type B personality and Paul is type A. I'm the messy one. He's the one who will take out the trash. But we're both equally dedicated in the gym. That's where I am as much type A."

International success, wholesome good looks and their "aw-shucks" smiles have



Not that they have shied from the attention. Like any true celebrities, Morgan and Paul have their own website, www.hammtwins.com, where childhood and competition photos commingle with their routine videos, schedule of appearances and promotions and tips for telling the twins apart. According to fan postings on the site, Morgan's nose is curvier and wider, Paul has more freckles and a wider neck, Morgan's face is skinnier with smaller teeth and darker eyes, and Paul has freckles on his neck that make both a perfect square and a kite.

In anticipation of an appearance on "The Ellen DeGeneres Show," Paul went shopping with perennial red-carpet television hostess Melissa Rivers and her

cameras. His day—complete with a bare-chested stop at a Los Angeles tanning booth—was scheduled for an October broadcast on the TV Guide Channel. He and Morgan pitched a reality show to ABC Family, appropriately titled “The Hamm Twins,” though there was no space in the 2004 lineup.

Capitalizing on the multiple birth theme, the pair has been asked to appear on the new Fox sitcom “Quintuplets.” Calls keep coming from such shows as “Saturday Night Live,” “20/20” and “Late Night with Conan O’Brien.” Calvin Klein is considering Paul for an underwear ad. The Bush girls—Jenna and Barbara—are said to be angling for a twin-to-twin meeting. The Hamms also were supposed to have joined the rest of the U.S. Olympic team for a visit with President George Bush on Oct. 18.

Prior to the Olympics, Morgan and Paul signed on to be part of the Rock ‘n’ Roll Gymnastics Championship, a 12-city tour. The brothers spend a fair share of their floor time break dancing amid their gymnastic moves—half-dressed in ripped shirts and exuding with each move a sexuality not readily apparent in

15 celebration thrown by Waukesha, Wisconsin, in which the twins—adorned in red, white and blue—were paraded through the streets of their hometown 30 miles from Milwaukee. (They also were cheered in Columbus on Sept. 9 at a rally with Olympic teammate Blaine Wilson at Wilson’s alma mater, DeSales High School.)

Yet the pair maintains celebrity hasn’t changed them (much). They still like to hang out in the Arena District or sit at home watching movies with fellow gymnast and neighbor Raj Bhavsar and Paul’s girlfriend, Lauren Davis, a Columbus-area gymnastics instructor. Paul says he met Davis earlier this year while walking along the Ohio State campus. “She stopped us and said, ‘You’re the Hamm brothers, aren’t you.’”

Sure, there’s Buckeye football, NHL hockey, Crew Stadium and all those top-ranked golf courses. But who knew the city was home to a gymnastics mecca?

Or at least one in the making. Ohio State’s program has produced a handful

About “start value”

A term few had ever heard became the buzz phrase of the 2004 Olympics amid the Paul Hamm scoring controversy.

What is a “start value” anyway?

According to OSU gymnastics coach Miles Avery, personal coach to Morgan and Paul Hamm, all gymnastics routines begin with a base possible score of 8.8. Added features in each routine can add up to 1.2 points for each gymnast. That means the most difficult routines have a start value of 8.8 plus 1.2, or 10. Any errors during the routine result in point reductions.

Yang Tae Young was supposed to have a start value of 10 on his parallel bar routine, but the judges erroneously started him at 9.9. It is a frequent error, says Avery.

“It is common, and it is the coach’s responsibility to check and make sure the value is correct,” he says. “If it’s not, they change it on the spot. There is no argument; you just make the correction.”

The correction, however, has never come after the competition has closed. “It’s unprecedented to even ask for it,” Avery said before an international body was to have resolved the issue in mid October. “There is no sport that you can go back and change the result after the event is over. These are field-of-play decisions. After the game is over, they should stand.”

That didn’t matter to the South Korean gymnastics authority, which claims Young’s correct start value would have made him the Olympic champion. Avery contends that all it would have done is make Paul Hamm work that much harder to win.

“I told Paul he needed a nine-point-eight on the high bar to win,” says Avery. “That is pedestrian for him. If I would have told him it would have taken a nine-point-nine to win, he would have focused on that. He had never done a nine-point-nine before, but he never had a nine-point-eight on the parallel bars before and he did that in the event prior.”

He adds, “I’m not sure anything would have stopped him that night.”



conventional competitions.

“It gives us the opportunity to get out and promote the sport,” says Paul. “There is a tour after every Games and it gives gymnasts the chance to let loose. People enjoy watching gymnastics, especially once the Olympics hit.”

The Sept. 16 stop at Nationwide Arena included a tandem routine featuring Paul and Morgan performing on the mat to Usher—which sent grown women into a near panty-throwing tizzy. They climaxed the evening with a *Matrix*-based floor routine, in which Paul portrayed Neo and Morgan acted as one of the four Agent Smiths doing “battle” with somersaults and flying kicks.

Their favorite appearance was the Sept.

of Olympians, including three-time Olympian Blaine Wilson and 2004 Olympic alternate Raj Bhavsar—and now has attracted the Hamm brothers. Perhaps it won’t be long before the chat around water coolers is about a Colman release or Tkatchev combination.

It was the skills and knowledge of Miles Avery, a Philadelphia native in his 17th season at OSU and his eighth as head gymnastics coach, that brought the twins to Columbus in January for private lessons. “The chance to work with gymnasts like them doesn’t come along that often,” says Avery, who was the Olympic team’s assistant coach.

“I’ve known Miles quite some time, since he was involved in the national team

program, and he always had top national athletes," Paul says. "I liked the way he coaches. There was not one particular thing, but rather a lot of great things about the Ohio State program. It's a great facility, and the trainers knew how to handle things. Plus, being able to train [pre-Olympics] with Blaine Wilson and Raj Bhavsar was too good an opportunity to pass up."

"There is no question the OSU gym is one of the best gyms," adds Morgan about the two-year-old site off Kenny Road that houses the training centers for the gymnastics, fencing and wrestling teams. "Having the best equipment and best coaches definitely helped us make the Olympic team."

"Our gymnasts have everything here that they need to be the best. Andy Geiger did me well," says Avery, referring to the OSU athletic director.

Unfortunately for the university, the Hamm brothers will not be wearing Buckeye uniforms; they are ineligible for

success at the 2000 Sydney Olympics at the tender age of 17, when each made event finals.

What surprised him was a sense of maturity beyond their years.

"They are both so technically sound as gymnasts, but they work out very differently," says Avery. "But Paul is so efficient. He has no wasted motion. He is very cerebral, but he doesn't need to constantly think about what he's doing. He is unwilling to spend time or energy unnecessarily."

"Morgan is not as natural. He has to think a little more," Avery continues. "But they always help each other do better, and they help other members of the team do better. People always say how hard Paul's success must be on Morgan, but Morgan won a silver team medal, too, and there is no way he would help his brother so much if it bothered him."

Though talent has taken them far, both Hammers know they couldn't have succeeded without family support. Sister

crashed unceremoniously into the scorers' table after a badly botched landing. "I was shocked," says Avery. "It was a big blow. We never expected he could miss like that. The vault didn't look that bad to me, and even Paul says it didn't feel that bad. But that landing... We had to put it past us. We had to focus on just getting a medal. I told him with nine-point-eights on the parallel bars and the high bar, he could still be on that podium. That was the only thing that mattered."

Hamm delivered his coach another surprise when he scored a 9.837 on the parallel bars—his best showing on that apparatus. That put him in fourth place. When his near-perfect high bar routine netted him an identical score, his name rose to first on the electronic scoreboard.

Paul Hamm was the best of the Olympics—the best in the world.

"At first, winning was just a shock," he says. "I was not expecting to after having such a big mistake on the vault. Then after the high bar, to see myself at the top of the

"We were doing a show on Sept. 24, and these girls started singing, 'Happy Birthday!'" Paul recalls. "I'm thinking, 'How did they know it was our birthday?' Then I realized they know a lot about us now."

collegiate competition because of their commercial participation. In fact, under NCAA rules, the pair may not even practice with the OSU gymnasts—instead, they can only use the gym before and after the team.

Even with all they have accomplished, the brothers admit feeling some sense of loss. "It would have been great to be part of a college team—the competition, the camaraderie—but I think I made a good choice," says Paul.

Miles Avery knew Morgan and Paul Hamm were great gymnasts.

He knew they had learned their craft in the barn of their parent's Wisconsin farm, where father Sandy rigged rings in the attic, crafted a pommel horse out of a chopped maple tree and used a pair of stairway railings to create parallel bars.

He knew about their victories over national and international competition, including Paul's all-around title at the 2003 world championships and silvers for both in the team competition. He knew of their

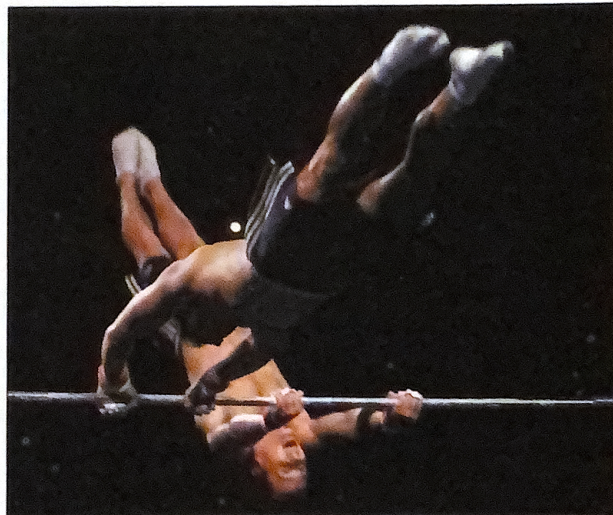
Betsy was the first star gymnast for the family, a multiple all-American who became the NCAA balance beam champion while at the University of Florida. Paul began formal gymnastics training at age 7. His brother was a few months behind.

"I'm not sure I would have joined gymnastics if Paul and Betsy hadn't been before me," says Morgan, "but I stumbled along after them and loved it right away."

Sandy Hamm, who contracts with Associated Press to sell wire stories to weekly and monthly publications, and his wife, Cecily, brought in Olympians Vitaly Sherbo and Andrei Kan and Soviet National Team member Konstantin Kolesnikov to coach the twins.

Since Paul was the reigning world champion when the Olympic flame was lit in Athens, he was considered a favorite for the all-around gold. But no American man had ever brought home that particular gold before.

It appeared that trend would continue after Paul's dismount off the vault. He



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scorecard—after all the hard work put into it—it made me so proud of what we accomplished."

His euphoria lasted a day and a half, before the appeal heard round the world—which came to light just hours before Hamm was to compete in four event finals in the pursuit of more medals. "It pretty quickly became this huge deal," he says. "I couldn't ignore it. But I also had to compete. It was very difficult. I wanted to focus on my routine, and instead I was focused on what would happen with my medal."

Paul's night was not made any easier when an upset crowd—prompted by a low score for four-time Olympic gold medalist Alexei Nemov—delayed his routine 10 minutes. Hamm still managed a strong enough performance to win the silver on the high bar for his third medal of the Games.

"I knew I could do that routine under

REUTERS/DAVID J. PHILLIP/AP



any circumstances, and I guess I was right," he says wryly.

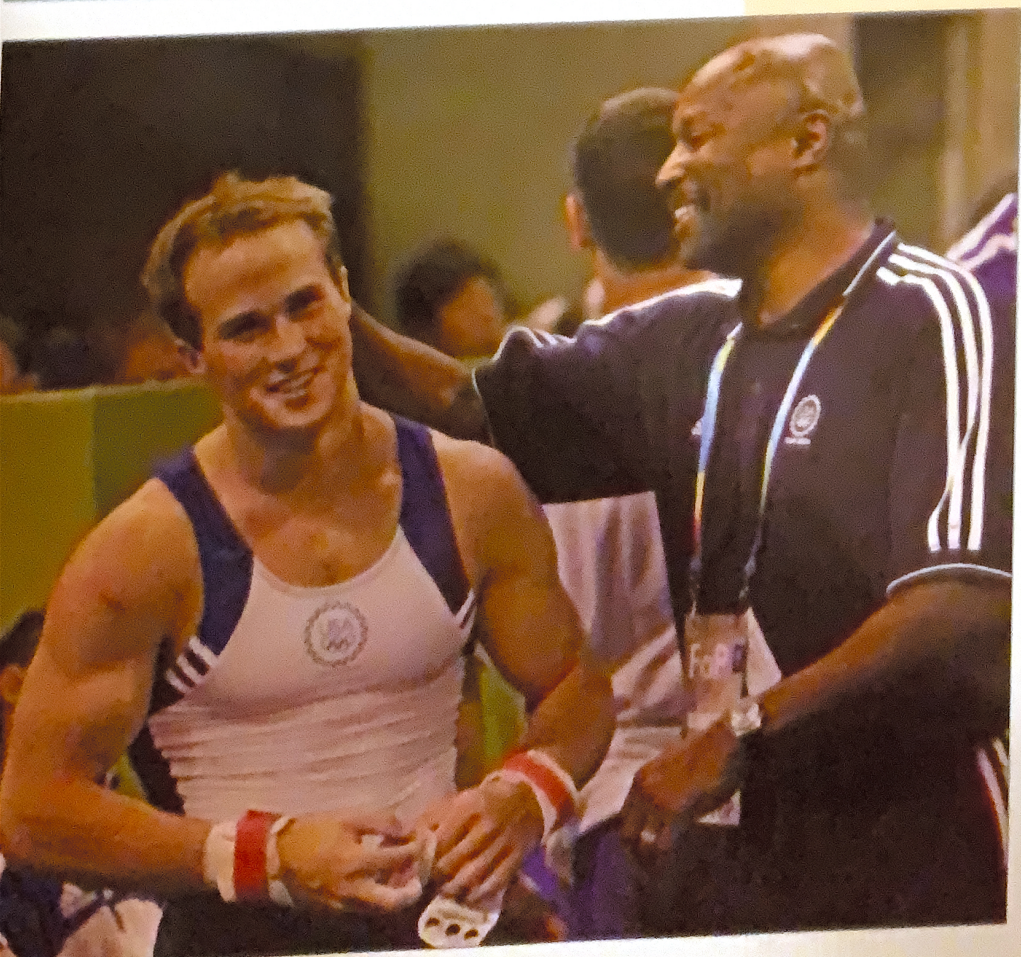
College may seem a long way from the success and celebrity that comes from being Olympic champions, but both Hamm brothers say they're excited by the call of the OSU classroom.

Paul ponders continuing the health and fitness management major he began at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, while Morgan may look toward physical therapy. "I'm really excited to start school," says Morgan. "I took a semester off to train for the Olympics, but I love the school environment. It's also great to not be around the gymnastics crowd all the time and to be able to do just normal stuff like going to the movies at the Lennox or just hanging out."

"We live pretty close to campus and the workout gym," Paul adds. "We can get downtown very easily, and we love that. Columbus is a great place to live, and it's really started to feel like home."

The gym will feel like a second home to the brothers, as they spend the next four years working toward their ultimate goal: another trip to the Olympics, where Paul will try, at age 25, to repeat as all-around champion—this time without question or controversy.

OPPOSITE: Morgan and Paul performed with the Rock 'n' Roll Gymnastics tour, which stopped at Nationwide Arena in September. **THIS PAGE:** Paul Hamm at the Summer Olympics, competing in the vault during the men's gymnastics team final, and being congratulated by his coach, Miles Avery of Ohio State, after his routine on the high bar earned him the gold medal in the individual all-around.



Though Morgan hopes his newfound celebrity might land him a scarce ticket to Lambeau Field this season to watch the Green Bay Packers, the brothers realize they also have another team for which to root. "I can't wait to see a Buckeye football game," says Paul of his plans for 2005. "That must be a pretty incredible experience."

Surprising words from a young man who has been at the top of the sports world for the past three months, but the Hamm twins say there's more to life than celebrity.

"We want everyone to realize we're just normal people," Morgan says, "not like everyone else."

Except with Olympic medals around their necks and a world of opportunity at their feet. ■

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