

Bart's Back

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The blond, muscular young man at the World Gymnastics Championships in Budapest, Hungary, in October was a familiar figure to international gymnastics fans, but few had expected to see him there, and certainly not in the thick of the competition. By the end of the meet, however, there was no doubt: Oklahoma's Bart Conner was back and a man to be reckoned with in the upcoming Olympic Games in Los Angeles.

If Conner succeeds in qualifying for the U.S. Olympic team at the trials in Jacksonville, Florida, next June, it will be the third time he has done so. In 1976, at the age of 17, he was the youngest male gymnast at the Montreal games. Four years later he was the No. 1 qualifier on the U.S. team slated for competition in Moscow. Both events stand out in his memory as exercises in frustration and disappointment.

Conner already had won the Championship of the U.S.A. a year before his initial Olympic appearance as fourth on the six-man U.S. team. But international inexperience and lack of maturity took its toll on his performance, which he always has considered a disaster. . . (Continued)

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On the other hand, 1980 was to be Bart Conner's year. He was at the top of his form, fresh from two world individual event championships in 1979, the pommel horse at the World Cup competition in Tokyo and the parallel bars at the World Championships in Fort Worth, Texas. He went all out in the Olympic trials, in spite of an arm injury suffered during the competition, and finished first. But there would be no Olympics for the Americans.

President Jimmy Carter had called for a boycott of the 1980 games even before the trials to protest the Soviet Union's invasion of Afghanistan. The decision held. Ironically, Conner's injury, a torn biceps, required surgery that would have kept him out of the Olympics anyway.

He returned for his senior year of intercollegiate competition at the University of Oklahoma. (He had red shirted the year before to concentrate on preparation for the Olympics.) He won the United States Gymnastics Federation's Nissen Award in 1981 as the nation's outstanding gymnast, but failed to repeat as the NCAA all-around champion when a slip on the parallel bars dropped him .05 point behind Jim Hartung of Nebraska. The OU team also finished second to Nebraska in that meet.

Although disappointed, Bart Conner, at the ripe old age of 23, could look back on an incredible string of accomplishments.

A native of Morton Grove, Illinois, a northside suburb of Chicago, the 10-year-old Bart got a late start in gymnastics by today's standards. By the seventh grade, he had been tabbed as a comer in the strong Chicago area prep gymnastics program. But Oklahoma eventually became his home after being recruited in 1976 by OU Coach Paul Ziert, who formerly had coached in a Chicago high school. Conner's parents and a brother moved to Norman three years later when his father became an associate professor at OU. Another brother

World Wide Photos

Bart Conner flies forward during his vault performance at the 1979 World Gymnastics Championships in Fort Worth, where he won his second world individual event title on parallel bars, the U.S. team took the bronze medal in the international competition.

lives in Fayetteville, Arkansas.

Conner joined an OU team that had been ranked 19th nationally just one year before. After one meet, the Sooners jumped to fourth, and by the end of the season, they had tied Indiana State for the NCAA title with Conner finishing second in the all-around, .35 point behind his former Olympic teammate, Kurt Thomas. The following year the team repeated as the NCAA champs, and Conner took the all-around title.

While Conner was leading OU to four Big Eight titles and winning an unprecedented four conference all-around championships, he also was helping carve a place for U.S. men's gymnastics on the international level as a member of every major U.S. team since 1975. Finally, at the 1979 World Championships in Fort Worth, the United States became internationally competitive, capturing the bronze medal. With the prospect of Conner, Hartung, Thomas and Peter Vidmar of UCLA on the same team for the Moscow Olympics, the future had looked promising—until Afghanistan.

So, in the summer of 1981, with his collegiate eligibility behind him, it was hard-decision time. Conner announced that he intended to stay eligible for the 1984 Olympics. The Olympics, however, were three long years away, and by 1984 Bart Conner would be 26 years old. Yet an Olympic medal was virtually the only one to elude him, and he couldn't bear to give up competition without one more try.

Still several credit hours short of his degree in public relations/journalism, he continued to take classes and to work out at OU's new Sam Viersen Gymnastics Center — which in many ways was "the house that Bart built." The personable, articulate Conner also became the United States Gymnastics Federation's most popular front man in promoting the sport nationwide. He became a television network color commentator, often competing at the same time by hurriedly slipping a jacket and tie over his competition uniform to go before the cameras between events. One ABC random poll ranked the Sooner gymnast as one of the 10 most popular amateur athletes in any sport.

As an international competitor for

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Television made him a celebrity. ABC called him one of America's 10 most popular amateur athletes, but to his fans in Lloyd Noble Center, he was just "Bart."

the past two years, however, Conner has been in a holding pattern; some of his fans even feared he might retire before 1984. Kurt Thomas had retired before the 1980 trials; Jim Hartung was still around, but younger gymnasts, like Vidmar and Mitch Gaylord, also a UCLA product, were becoming the superstars. The qualifying trials last summer for the World Championships in Hungary loomed large for Conner's Olympic hopes.

The trials were held in two parts. At the first in Chicago in June, which counted 30 percent toward qualifying, Conner ran afoul of the high bar and finished ninth. It didn't look good. But Eugene, Oregon, in September was another story with a phenomenal comeback performance that landed him second place on the team.

Conner and his U.S. teammates earned some international respect in Hungary. Their combined efforts placed the United States fourth behind China, the Soviet Union and Japan, and the Americans expect to challenge the Japanese and the East Germans for third in Los Angeles to

take this country's first Olympic team medal in gymnastics.

In the all-around, Conner qualified for the finals with Gaylord, who finished eighth, and Vidmar, who was ninth; Conner finished eleventh. But the Oklahoman also qualified for three individual event finals, setting the World Championship career record for such appearances. He finished fifth in floor exercise, tied for sixth in parallel bars and tied for seventh in pommel horse. He scored a 9.9 (of a perfect 10.0) in each event in the final round. After the meet, *World Gymnast*, the official publication of the International Federation of Gymnastics, pronounced Conner "America's greatest gymnast."

Bart Conner never doubted that he could make it back — "old man" or not. What is more, he believes he can be No. 1 on the United States team in Los Angeles. To any who would question his optimism, he repeats the newspaper headline that appeared on a feature story about his exploits when he came to Oklahoma in 1976: "You Gotta Wanna." —CJB 