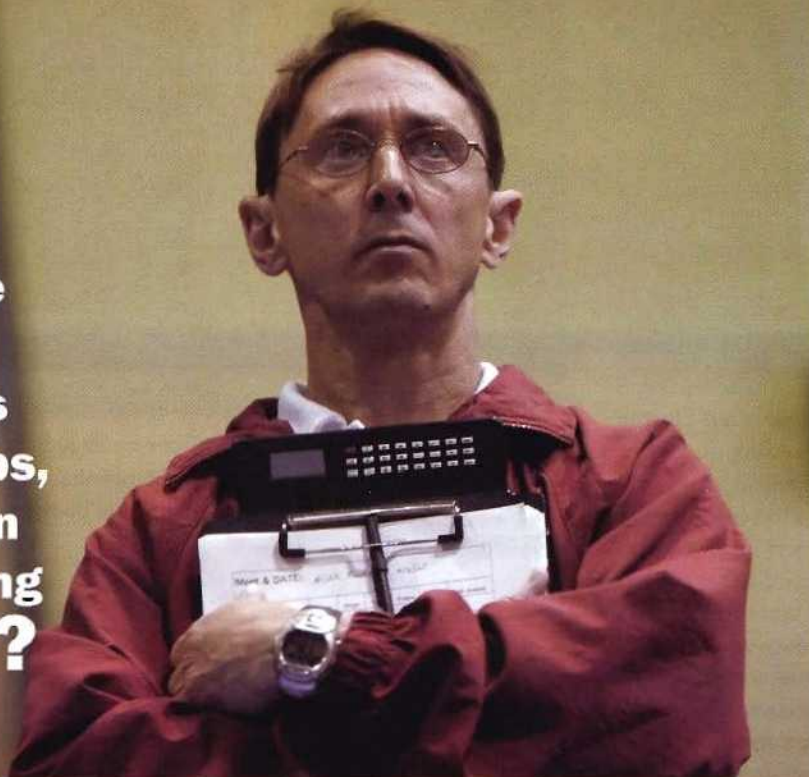


# Atop the Gymnastics World

**With Mark Williams' Sooners claiming three of the last four NCAA men's championships, is it too soon to start talking dynasty?**

Nihal Mahaweduge



All eyes converged on the far end of the flowing blue runway where the University of Oklahoma's last hope stood awaiting one final sprint toward glory. Undaunted by the sounds of a muffled celebration coming from the Ohio State contingent across the way, Jonathan Horton took a long, deep breath and in his mind pictured a perfect landing.

The diminutive true freshman could sense the escalating pressure; if he failed to execute a near-perfect vault, any chance the Sooners had to take home the men's NCAA gymnastics team title would be lost. Yet he knew that even his career best might not be enough.

Overhead and far from his vantage point, the giant scoreboard hanging from the Holleder Center's rafters at West Point, New York, offered a glimpse of what Horton and his Oklahoma teammates were facing—a deficit against a No. 1-ranked Ohio State squad that already could taste victory.

Oklahoma coach Mark Williams, whose teams had won NCAA titles in 2002 and 2003, was frantically doing the mental math. After a few seconds of crunching numbers, he realized Horton would need to produce the best vault of his young career to give OU any shot at catching the rival Buckeyes. *continued*

BY JAY C. UPCHURCH

"I really wasn't sure if we still had a chance to win since we had literally watched Ohio State put up all of these good scores on the rings," the 5-foot-1 Horton explains. "I had no clue what score I needed on my vault attempt, but I knew it had to be good."

The Sooners entered the final rotation with a 1.325-point lead over the Buckeyes, but now they needed a small miracle. As it turned out, Horton was just the man to deliver such a feat.

Suddenly, the silence was deafening as Horton made his approach and launched himself confidently into his vault—a difficult Kas full-twist. An entire season's worth of drama and suspense flashed during that two-second leap of faith, and the reaction was one of relief and renewed hope when Horton stuck his landing, just as he had imagined.

"That kind of pressure and intensity might affect some people differently, but I honestly do better under those kinds of circumstances," the Houston native says.

Moments later, the board sparkled with a 9.5, tying Horton's previous best vault score. Then like a Las Vegas tote board, the lights were rearranged at the top of the team standings, sending the Sooners into mass revelry. Oklahoma's third national championship in four years came via the narrowest of margins, 225.625 to 225.450.

"Just an unbelievable ending with an amazing performance by Jonathan. Every one of our guys was awesome. Many of them had the meet of their lives. As it turned out, every little fraction of a point mattered," Williams says. "In the end, it was as if we were all holding our breath waiting to see how it would turn out. When the scoreboard flashed the final results, everyone went crazy."

It was a storybook finish, according to All-America senior Josh Gore. "It had all the makings of a Hollywood movie," he says, quickly going over the suspense-filled details that helped supply a perfect finish to his OU career.

The Sooners began writing the unlikely final chapter to the 2005 season during a two-hour meeting on the eve of the team finals. The seven seniors on the roster talked about how important the OU program was to them and about how important it was to go out on top.

For six of the team's seven seniors, this edition of the NCAA



Nihal Mahawaduge

OU gymnastics coach Mark Williams cheers as judges reveal OU's victory over Ohio State for the 2005 national championship. The Sooners slipped past the Buckeyes, 225.625 to 225.450.

Championships would be their last competition as gymnasts. Only still rings specialist David Henderson planned to compete in the Olympics trials; the others would bid adieu.

"Until then, I hadn't seen the camaraderie or togetherness we needed to win a national title. But it truly became a team effort that night," says Williams, voted the NCAA Coach of the Year for the third time since taking over the OU program prior to the 2000 season. "They talked about going out with no regrets, and I started to sense there was a chance for this team to do something special."

Oklahoma began the season ranked No. 1, but thanks to some early-season stumbles, fell as low as No. 4 at one point. A dual competition victory over top-ranked Ohio State in early March proved to be a confidence-builder for Williams' squad. Then the Sooners set the stage for a potential showdown with the Buckeyes by scoring a school

record 225.650 points en route to capturing a sixth Mountain Pacific Sports Federation Championship.

But even with that title in tow, the team unity Williams described was absent from OU's arsenal.

"We really bonded the night before the finals. We came together as a team, and it all clicked after that," recalls Gore, whose performance on the pommel horse was one of the contributing factors in OU's championship effort.

Four freshmen dotted the senior-laden lineup when the lights went up on the team finals at the 2005 National Collegiate Men's Gymnastics Championships. Taqiy Abdullah-Simmons, Jacob Messina and, of course, Horton, all played significant roles in helping assure their veteran teammates would depart on a triumphant note.

The individual event finals followed the team competition, and Horton again led the Sooners by earning All-America honors in five different events—all-around, floor exercise, vault, still rings and high bar. Abdullah-Simmons was an All-America performer in the all-around and on the parallel bars, while Messina turned the trick on the floor exercise.

In all, the Sooners earned 13 All-America honors, including Gore on the pommel horse and parallel bars. Jamie Henderson was recognized for his work on the still rings, and his brother David Henderson was the Sooners' lone individual national



Olympic Gold Medalist and ESPN commentator Bart Conner, a former Sooner gymnast, second from right, congratulates members of the victorious OU men's team on winning their third national championship in four years.

champion, as he topped the field on rings.

"Anytime you win a national championship and see your guys perform the way we did, it's special. But this one is also rewarding because of all the elements involved—the drama, suspense and so much emotion," says Williams. "I can't imagine this is not what the NCAA has in mind for all of its sports."

OU Director of Athletics Joe Castiglione watched all of the drama unfold in New York, and he could not agree more.

"That was great stuff, a great end to another great season," says Castiglione. "It may not be completely fair to say, but what they've accomplished the last five years is dynasty material. Any way you look at it, it's very, very impressive."

Besides winning national titles in '02, '03 and this spring, the Sooners were runners-up in '01 and '04. That is an amazing streak for a program potentially on the chopping block in the aftermath of sweeping Title IX reform not all that long ago.

Castiglione discussed that very topic with Williams before hiring him to lead the program six years ago.

"There was some concern about the state of collegiate gymnastics, and it was something that needed to be addressed. A lot of programs were being cut, and it threatened the legitimacy of the sport," says Castiglione. "Now, we feel the situation has become more stable. In a way, it's stronger from top to bottom than it's ever been, because the talent pool is concentrated among a smaller existing group of programs."

Williams agrees the talent pool is not nearly as diluted as it was when there were 75 teams across the country. The OU coach insists that any of the six teams invited to the 2005 NCAA


Championships was capable of taking home the title.

"It's so competitive—I feel it helps make our championships more valid," Williams adds.

"One of the big things for us has been the support we've received from Joe Castiglione and the entire OU athletics department. I saw how thrilled Joe was when we won the title again this time. He was right there involved in the emotion and the celebration. Plus, he's always been honest with us."

Winning three national titles in the last four years has quieted any speculation about OU dropping men's gymnastics. In fact, the dialogue has shifted to a proposed renovation of the Sam Viersen Center, where the men's and women's teams practice. More than \$500,000 already has been raised for the cause.

"I've always said Title IX is the right idea because we definitely need equality in men's and women's athletics. But the way it's applied, well, you hate to destroy a worthwhile product in order to make it work," Williams adds. "As long as we don't suddenly start losing a bunch of [gymnastics] programs, I feel we're safe. That's always been Joe's main concern—that our championship doesn't turn into some glorified intrasquad meet."

"Right now, the level of competition in our sport is as high as it's ever been. All we can do is look to the future and continue to produce the best product possible." 

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