

Written by Dwight Normile

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In the summer of 2010 I bumped into 2008 U.S. champion **David Sender** at the airport. We were both waiting for our connection to the Visa Championships in Hartford, Conn., where he would serve on the Men's Selection Committee for the world team. Sender, who graduated from Stanford in 2009, had also just finished his first year of veterinary school at Illinois.

During our conversation I asked him if he still had the 99-cent goldfish he had bought for an eighth-grade science project (his first fish died). A fish so durable that he even took him to college, sealed in a Zip-loc bag of water on the plane. He told me he still had the fish, which had traveled by car back to Illinois.

I also asked if he might make a comeback. He just laughed.

Two years earlier he had been a shoo-in to make the Beijing Olympic team, but he rolled an ankle after stilling a vibrating high bar. The sprain forced him out of the Olympic trials he had a good chance at winning. But what hurt deeper was being overlooked completely when the Olympic team and alternates were named. Especially when **Paul Hamm**, who had a broken hand, was named directly to the team. (Hamm would eventually withdraw.)

Sender served on the Men's Selection Committee again last summer in St. Paul, Minn., which is when the gears started turning again. He had figured the level of gymnastics would have advanced beyond his reach.

"When I was watching championships, it didn't really seem that way," Sender said. "I think that kind of got the process started for me."

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Sender, a native of Arlington Heights, Ill., is taking a one-year break from vet school to chase his Olympic dream one more time. He trains at Illinois under 2008 Olympian **Justin Spring** before the college team starts its workout. Then he hangs around and helps out.

You see, Sender can't forget 2008. It is one thing to hurt yourself on a Super-G element, but quite another to knock yourself out the way he did. So the only way to get past the disappointment is to try again.

"Bottom line, I still felt like I had a lot of gymnastics left in me," he said. "And if there was any chance at all that I had of making the Olympics this year, then I owed it to myself to at least try. And after how things went in '08, I guess I sort of still felt something unfinished."

Sender hurried back for the 2012 Winter Cup to place sixth all-around and regain national-team status. He also placed second on vault and third on rings. And though he didn't throw the Yurchenko-double pike he unleashed in 2009 (he did a Yurchenko-2.5 twist), he's training 17.0 and 17.2 vaults.

"I have to be a little more conscious of my age now," said Sender, 26. "And that vault is a really big vault. And even when it's done really well, it's still a tough landing to take.

"I think a 17.00, at least, on vault for me — I don't know if it would make or break my case, but I think it would help quite a bit," he says.

On a scale from 1-10, Sender gave himself a 6 on his performance at Winter Cup, where he said he watered down in places. And his prolific floor exercise proved too long for his level of conditioning at the time.

"That's the hardest [routine] so far, in terms of endurance," he said.

Sender knows the U.S. is still weak on pommel horse and rings, and said he's been training

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pommels twice as much as any other event.

"I can cover rings (for the team) just fine — I think everybody knows that," he said. "So in my head, obviously pommel horse is the ticket. So that's been something we've really focused on a lot."

With a few more months of conditioning, a healthy Sender should be a major player in the 2012 Olympic team dogfight. And he has to be the sentimental favorite, as well. But regardless of his fortunes this summer, he knows he's doing the right thing.

"Honestly, I tried to keep [2008] out of my head a little bit when I was making the decision to come back, but I think it would be pretty ridiculous to say that that didn't influence my decision," he said. "That was kind of the peak of my gymnastics, and that was my best shot and what I felt was supposed to be my time to make it. And I didn't even have a chance necessarily to prove whether or not I should be on the team. That was really tough to go through."

At the end of our conversation yesterday, I had to ask Sender if he still had his goldfish.

"I do," he said enthusiastically. "He's still doing OK."

Sender also said the fish still didn't have a name. How about London?