

# A LOOK AT THE U.S. WOMEN'S OLYMPIC MARATHON TRIALS

By DON SIKORSKI  
*Special to the Bulletin*

The United States Women's Olympic Trials Marathon race takes place on Sunday, April 3<sup>rd</sup> in St. Louis, Missouri. Beginning at 7:00 a.m. at Washington University's Francis Field, the women's 2004 Trials race has 143 qualifiers, led by 2000 Olympian and United States marathon record holder Deena Kastor. While times of 2:48:00 or better earned a spot in the field, the top contenders with sub 2:40 credentials have their expenses paid. The Olympic "A" standard time of 2:37:00 or better (previously 2:32:00) will be required for an Olympic berth. The top 20 finishers will each earn a portion of the \$220,000 prize money purse in addition to a number of bonus incentives. Jenny Spangler (1996) and Christine Clark (2000) came out of nowhere to win the last two Trials races. Is there another long shot contender in this year's field that will pull off the upset in St. Louis? Here's a look at some of the top contenders for this year's Olympic Marathon Trials race:

**DEENA KASTOR (2:21:16 - 3 to 1):** Kastor is clearly the class of the field. Kastor (formerly Deena Drossin) set a world best road time at the Carlsbad 5000 in 2002, then went on to win her fifth U.S. 8K XC title and placed 2<sup>nd</sup> at the World Cross Country Championships that year. She also set the American record for 10,000 meters. In her debut attempt at the 26.2 mile distance, Drossin won the 2001 U.S. women's marathon title at the New York City Marathon in 2:26:58, the fourth-fastest American time in history and the fastest debut marathon ever run by an American female. With her 5K speed, cross-country strength, and a qualifying time nearly 7 minutes faster than anyone in the field, Kastor will get most of the attention and is America's best chance for an Olympic medal in Athens.

**COLLEEN DE REUCK (2:28:01 - 7 to 2):** Although her prime racing years may be behind her, the former South African, with a 2:26:35 marathon best, is a strong contender with the superior resume of the entire field. De Reuck also has plenty of Olympic experience, finishing 9<sup>th</sup> in the 1992 Olympic Marathon, 13<sup>th</sup> at 10,000 meters at the Atlanta Games in 1996, and 31<sup>st</sup> in the 2000 Olympic Marathon in Sydney. Her 2:28:01 gives her the second fastest qualifying time behind Kastor's 2:21:16 and her marathon credentials include a win at the 1996 Berlin Marathon and a runner-up effort at New York City in 1997. Look for De Reuck to be in contention for a top 3 spot over the final miles.

**DEEJA YOUNGQUIST (2:29:01 - 11 to 2):** Youngquist established herself amongst the elite marathoners with her 10<sup>th</sup> place finish overall (2<sup>nd</sup> American) at the 2003 Chicago Marathon in 2:29:01. Youngquist's 2003 season included a runner-up finishing at the U.S. 25K Championship (1:30:54), 4<sup>th</sup> in the Half Marathon Championships (1:12:51), and 4<sup>th</sup> at the New Haven 20K Championship race (1:08:47). Coached by boyfriend Teddy Mitchell, himself a national class distance runner, Youngquist has shown tremendous improvement and has been running well enough to earn a place on the team.

**BLAKE RUSSELL (2:30:41 - 7 to 1):** Russell's win at the 2003 Twin Cities Marathon in her debut at the 26.2 mile distance earned her a U.S. Championship in 2:30:41. The Acton, Massachusetts resident was 7<sup>th</sup> in the 2000 U.S. 10,000 meter Trials race and has strong credentials at that distance. Russell is a newcomer to the marathon distance, but her Twin Cities effort earned her the 4<sup>th</sup> fastest qualifying time in the field and gave her the confidence that she can win a race at the marathon distance.

**MILENA GLUSAC (2:31:14 - 10 to 1):** Glusac had a breakout season in 2001 with three U.S. road titles, and has been running well ever since. Glusac made her marathon debut in November 2001 at New York City, finishing 13<sup>th</sup> in 2:34:46 for U.S. runner-up honors behind Deena Drossin (now Kastor). Glusac returned to New York a year later to finish 9<sup>th</sup> in a personal best 2:31:14. For over five years before that, Glusac suffered through bouts of Chronic Fatigue Syndrome, Epstein Barr virus, and stress fractures. She has overcome all of those setbacks to put herself in contention for a place on the 2004 Olympic Marathon team.

**LINDA SOMERS-SMITH (2:37:14 - 25 to 1):** The 42 year-old Somers-Smith was the runner-up to Spangler in the 1996 Trials race in 2:30:06. But that was eight years ago, and Somers-Smith no longer puts in the same mileage as her Olympic years. On her side is experience and mental toughness, and that could pay dividends in a top 3 race format. How tough is Somers-Smith? Consider that she finished 31<sup>st</sup> in the 1996 Olympic Marathon race in Atlanta despite tearing Achilles tendon. She clearly has plenty of marathon experience, but the early pace will dictate whether Somers-Smith is able to be a factor.

**JENNIFER RHINES (2:41:16 - 30 to 1):** Rhines made a name for herself with an impressive runner-up finish in the 2000 Olympic Trials 10,000 meter race in a personal best of 31:58. The former Villanova standout has excelled at the middle distances, but is unproven over the 26.2 miles distance.

**JOAN SAMUELSON (2:42:28 - 75 to 1):** Samuelson (then Benoit) won the very first women's Olympic marathon in 1984. Now the 46 year-old Samuelson will compete in the 2004 Trials race. 20 year earlier, Samuelson recovered from arthroscopic knee surgery to win an inspirational Trials race just 17 days later. Benoit had won the Boston Marathon in 1979 and 1983 before earning a gold medal in the 1984 Olympic Marathon in Los Angeles, defeating favorites Grete Waitz and Ingrid Kristiansen in the process. Samuelson's qualifying time of 2:42:28 in the 2002 Chicago Marathon was also a national 45-49 age group record for the distance. Although Samuelson will be a strong sentimental favorite to make the team, don't expect to see her run with the leaders from the gun like the Benoit of old.

**INJURED / OUT:** Marla Runyan's 2:27:10 is the 2<sup>nd</sup> fastest qualifying time of the bunch, but reports have Runyan focusing on 10,000 meters and passing on the marathon in 21004.

**OTHER CONTENDERS:** Runners like Jenny Spangler in 1996 and Christine Clark in 2000 were virtual unknowns when they won the Women's Marathon Trials races. Spangler has qualified for this year's Trials race at 2:32:39 and can't be ruled out as a possible contender. Other possible contenders include a trio of California runners: Magdalena Lewy (2:31:38 in the 2003 Pittsburgh Marathon), Sylvia Mosqueda (2:33:10 at the 2003 New York City Marathon), and Jill Gaitenby (2:34:54 at the 2003 World Championships Marathon), Sara Wells of Minnesota (2003 US Marathon Champion), Oregon's Susannah Beck (2:36:34 at Twin Cities in 2003), Virginia's Heather Hanscom (2:37:59 debut at Marine Corps Marathon), and former Stanford standout Julia Stamps (2:46:14 debut in Chicago). Unionville, Connecticut resident Mary Lynn Currier has qualified for the Trials race with a "B" standard with her 2:47:48 effort at the 2003 Hartford Marathon.

## **THE PICKS:**

1<sup>st</sup>: KASTOR 2:28:44 – Kastor has the experience, the credentials, and the mental toughness to be first across the finish line in St. Louis. Anyone else first to the line would be considered an upset.

2<sup>nd</sup>: DE REUCK 2:29:17 – De Reuck is probably the most consistent runner in the field and although she may not have enough to stay with Kastor, no one would be surprised to see her in the top 3 at the finish.

2<sup>nd</sup>: RUSSELL 2:29:39 – Despite having only run one previous marathon, Russell showed tremendous potential with her Twin Cities win. 10K specialists have historically converted that success to the marathon, and there's no reason that Russell can't be a contender in St. Louis.

4<sup>th</sup>: GLUSAC 2:30:04 – Although the marathon may not be her strongest distance, Glusac should be in the mix most of the way and could surprise.

5<sup>th</sup>: GAITENBY 2:31:54 – Gaitenby won a U.S. Marathon title at Twin Cities in 2001 after moving from Boston to California to train full-time. Although she may lack the credentials of Kastor or De Reuck, Gaitenby, who was 9<sup>th</sup> at the 2003 Boston Marathon, could contend for a top 5 spot.

Don Sikorski writes a twice-monthly running column for the Norwich Bulletin. His "Coach's Corner" column can be accessed at [www.moheganstriders.org](http://www.moheganstriders.org). He can also be reached by e-mail at [kdcsikorski@netzero.net](mailto:kdcsikorski@netzero.net).