

DOES THE U.S. STAND A MEDAL CHANCE?

By **DON SIKORSKI**
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The 2004 Summer Olympic Games are under way. While national security issues puts these Games under the microscope, Olympic tradition will boast a strong presence with a return to Athens, Greece, the site where the very first modern Olympic Games were conducted back in 1896 and where the ancient Games originated in 770 B.C. And while post 9/11/01 security measures will be great, so will the athletic competition.

In the world of Track and Field, athletes will range from those just happy to be representing their countries to those carrying the burden of great expectations. Morocco's Hicham El Guerrouj (men's 1,500 meters) and Great Britain's Paula Radcliffe (women's marathon) are two athletes that fall into the second category. For these athletes, anything less than an Olympic gold medal will be considered failure. El Guerrouj owns the world record at 1,500 meters, but failed to earn gold in his last two Olympic attempts. El Guerrouj tripped and fell in the 1996 Games and did not place, and was forced to settle for silver in 2000 behind Kenya's Noel Ngeny. Radcliffe is clearly the best women's marathoner in the world, but anything can happen in a 26.2 mile race in the heat and humidity. These two athletes head to Athens as clear cut favorites to earn a gold medal.

How does the United States distance runners measure up against the world's best? In 2000, the U.S. team clearly did not perform to expectations, earning only 20 medals in total, an all-time low tally. Now the list of potential medal candidates has been challenged by the BALCO doping scandal, claiming big name athletes like Michelle Collins (400 meters and 4x400m Relay) and Regina Jacobs (1,500 meters), both of which carried the strong potential to medal. It's unknown just how rampant drug use amongst foreign athletes is, but the United States is dedicated to sending a clean team to Athens. The rest of the world is also catching up to Americans in Track and Field. Consider the progression of African distance runners since the last 1960's. Sprinters from other countries have also progressed as access to advanced training techniques becomes more available. Here's a look at how America's Track and Field athletes stack up with the rest of the world in the 2004 Olympic Games:

SPRINTS: The United States boasts plenty of strong sprinters, and the 2004 team measures up against the great U.S. teams of the past. Maurice Greene, Justin Gatlin, and Shawn Crawford are all potential gold medalists. Jamaica's Asafa Powell attempt to deny American a clean sweep in the sprints. Jeremy Wariner leads the 400 meter squad. The women's team earned seven medals in Sydney in 2000, thanks to the dominance of Marion Jones. However, don't look for Jones on the 2004 sprint team. Instead, America's hopes fall on LaTasha Colander (100 meters), Allyson Felix (200 meters), and Monique Hennagan (400 meters).

HURDLES: The United States stands a solid chance to earn medals in both the 110 and the 400 meter hurdle races. China's Liu Xiang and Felix Sanchez of the Dominican Republic are the strongest non-American contenders. On the women's side, Gail Devers, Sheena Johnson, and Joanna Hayes each bring legitimate medal contention to Athens.

THROWING: American athletes dominate in the shot put. The discus and hammer events are up in the air in terms of medal favorites in 2004. In the decathlon, Tom Pappas and Bryan Clay have a solid chance to be on the podium when it's all said and done.

JUMPS: Big names athletes like Carl Lewis and Dwight Stones are in the past, but America is still strong in the jumping events. Long jumper Dwight Phillips leads a talented group of athletes on the men's side. The ladies best chances ride on the strong shoulders of pole vaulter Stacy Dragila and Marion Jones, if she can regain her past form, in the long jump.

DISTANCE: The American men have been crucified for their inability to regain the dominance of the Ryan's and the Shorter's of yesteryear. Alan Webb carries a legitimate shot to make the final at 1,500 meters, but how he measures up on the world stage remains to be seen. Kenya's Bernat Lagat is expected to challenge El Guerrouj for the gold. Tactical finals in past Olympics leave just about anyone with a chance. Tim Broe and former Massachusetts schoolboy standout Jonathan Riley lead the 5,000 meter team. Look for El Guerrouj to potentially double at 5,000 meters as well. Marathoners Alan Culpepper, Med Keflezighi, and Dan Browne have all shown solid progress in the tune-up time heading into Athens, but would all be considered long shots at best to finish in the top 3 positions. An injury to former world record holder Khalid Khannouchi erased America's strongest medal hopes in the distance races (although Khannouchi is rounding into shape and expected to race in this fall's Chicago Marathon). Look for world record holder Paul Tergat of Kenya to add another Olympic medal to this resume. Former Arkansas standout Dan Lincoln leads the U.S. team in the 3,000 meter steeplechase and could make the final. Browne will also double at 10,000 meters. Ethiopia's Kenenisa Bekele will challenge fellow countryman Haile Gebreselassie in the 10K (Bekele will also race the 5,000). Injuries will force young Dathan Ritzenhein, who recently left the University of Colorado to turn professional, to postpone his Olympic medal hopes until 2008. For the ladies, Nicole Teter stands a top 3 chance at 800 meters. The 1,500 will take place without American standard bearers Regina Jacobs, who has retired amidst numerous drug accusations, and Suzy Favor-Hamilton, who has been slowed by injury. Marla Runyan and Shalane Flanagan will face stiff competition at 5,000 and 10,000 meters and would have to run well above their ability to medal in Athens. The only other potential medal hope for the U.S. women is Deena Kastor in the marathon. She will have to chase Radcliffe and Kenya's Catherine Ndereba to stand a chance. Colleen Dereuck and Jen Rhines will join Kastor on the starting line in Athens.

The United States Track and Field team will certainly make some noise at the 2004 Olympic Games. What affect the recent drug scandal will have on the team remains to be seen. An American medal in any event over 800 meters would be cause for celebration. Best of luck to all of the American athletes who will be making the trip to Athens to represent their country in Olympic competition. Let the Games begin.

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