

KASTOR'S EFFORT MADE AMERICA PROUD

By DON SIKORSKI
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Deena Drossin had enough. A former California state champion in both cross-country and track and 7 time SEC champion at Arkansas, Drossin was a national class distance runner with a bright future ahead of her. But soon after her collegiate career was over, Drossin realized that her heart just wasn't in it any more. Ready to hang up the spikes for good and move on with her life, Drossin finally decided to give competitive running one last effort, moving to Colorado to train seriously. The year was 1996.

Now flash forward to the 2004 Summer Olympic Games. Drossin, now Deena Kastor, toes the line in Athens for the start of the women's marathon as one of the race's legitimate medal contenders. Although she had also qualified for these Olympic Games at 10,000 meters, she has passed on that event to concentrate on the marathon. Despite most of the attention focused on the anticipated duel between Great Britain's world record holder Paula Radcliffe and Kenya's Catherine Ndereba, Kastor's presence in this race was still worthy of a mention. At 5'4" tall and 104 pounds, Kastor may be easy to overlook, but her credentials speak for themselves. A 14:45 5K best, 2 world XC silver medals, 6 U.S. National XC titles, an American record at 10K (30:50), and a marathon best of 2:21:16 set in London last spring that bettered Joan Benoit's American record, a mark which stood for 17 years. And despite a runner-up finish to Coleen De Reuck at the U.S. Olympic Marathon Trials race in April, Kastor, 31, was clearly America's best hope in this race.

Conditions in the Olympic Marathon differ greatly from races like London or Chicago, contested on pancake flat courses under ideal conditions and geared towards producing fast times. Instead, runners faced 91 degree temperatures and uphill climbs, making this race one of attrition rather than leg speed. Radcliffe, as expected, forged to the front and pushed the pace early and often, looking uncomfortable but committed to controlling the race from up front. The Commentators were quick to mention that Kastor, despite leading the American charge, was well back in 28th place at the 5K mark and already 1 minute and 20 seconds off the pace by 8 miles, a sign they believed spelled trouble if Kastor expected to make any kind of noise in this race. She was 1:40 back at 15K (9.3 miles) and soon written off, given little hope to be a factor in the race. But just after 30K, Kastor was looking strong and up to 18th place, still a minute or so back but maintaining the same deficit from the leaders. One by one, the runners ahead of her would crash and burn, the Athens heat and hills both relentless in its attack. Suddenly all eyes were on Kastor, who had now moved into the top 10 and was closing fast. Just after 22 miles, Radcliffe withered from the struggle of battling a marathon course that differed greatly from her 3 previous efforts, and stopped to walk. 10 seconds later, she was on the ground, distraught and disappointed that her Olympic dream would not come true. A new life for Kastor. She since moved up to 4th, just 18 seconds out of medal contention with a mile to go. The months of 3 workout days in the California heat were beginning to pay dividends. A half mile from the finish, Kastor speed past Ethiopia's Efenesh Alemu so quickly that it appeared they were competing in different events. Deena Kastor entered Olympic Stadium in 3rd place behind Japan's Mizuki Noguchi and Kenya's Catherine Ndereba, and over the course of the final stretch on the Olympic Stadium track, was brought to tears at there thought of what she was about to accomplish. Kastor's bronze medal effort of 2:27:20 was exactly 1 minute off the win, the second medal won by U.S. women in the marathon (Benoit's 1984 debut win in Los Angeles being the other), and gave new life to distance running in the United States. A perfect tactical race, Kastor had covered the final 7 miles faster than anyone else in the field.

A look back at Deena Kastor's preparation and execution of her 26.2 mile footrace is a blueprint of distance running excellence. Kastor has developed her strength as a former cross-country runner, gradually making the transition to the marathon over the past few years. Her previous races; the debut effort in the 2001 New York City Marathon (2:26:58) that made her the 4th fastest American female in history, a 6th place finish in the 2002 Chicago Marathon (2:26:53), and an American best in London, all indicated that Kastor was capable of running an excellent marathon. And despite a personal best that lagged nearly 6 minutes behind that of Radcliffe, Kastor and her Coach Joe Vigil understood that the Olympic Marathon was a different type of race, and handling the heat and the hills was of grater value than possessing miler's speed. She trained hard under the warm California sun dressed in a long-sleeve sleeve, tights, and a hat, often logging near 140 miles per week. She and Coach Vigil had clearly done their homework, and it paid off with an A+ performance. Sadly, the media chose to focus their attention on Gymnastics judges that can't add and NBA millionaires that can't shoot, but clearly more attention should have been given to this marathon effort. Deena Kastor is a class act that produced a terrific athletic performance when American distance running needed it most.

Racing Roundup

Records were broken at the 15th Annual Cathy Deary Road Race in Putnam on August 14th. A record high turnout of 317 runners battled warm conditions that saw 3 new age group records broken. Rebecca Stockdale-Wooley, the Master's course record-holder (29:43) from 10 years ago, returned to her former hometown and crushed the 50+ record of 36:33 by over 4 minutes, clocking 32:32 for the 5 Mile Race. North Carolina Tar Heel Meghan Owen watched from the sidelines as both of her course records were also bettered. 11-year-old Emily Chapman posted a time of 34:13 to erase Owen's 12 and under record of 13:31 set back in 1996, and 13-year-old Kristen Malloy of Maryland ran 33:16, shaving 43 seconds from Owen's 1999 mark of 33:59. Former Woodstock High School standout John Graham of Pomfret, currently competing at Syracuse University, was the overall winner in 26:37.....On Monday, September 6th, The City of New Haven will again host the USA Men's and Women's National Championship for 20 kilometers. It will be the 14th consecutive year that the New Haven race has served as a National Championship event. Defending champion Meb Keflezighi is competing in the Olympic Marathon in Athens and will be in New Haven, but women's champion Marla Runyan, who nipped Colorado's Coleen De Reuck at the tape in dramatic fashion in last year's race, is expected to return to defend her title. The 27th Annual race begins promptly at 8:30am from the New Haven Town Green. There is also an accompanying 5K and a ½ mile children's run, and race day registration is accepted. Check out www.jbsports.com to register or for more race information.

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