

LONDON, BOSTON MARATHON FIELDS SHAPING UP

By DON SIKORSKI
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Spring has finally sprung, and that's good news for runners who were faced with the challenge of training in snow, cold and darkness on a daily basis for the past four months or so. With clear roads and sunny skies ahead, two major marathons will take place this month, with the Flora London Marathon on Sunday, April 17th and the 109th B.A.A. Boston Marathon the very next day (Patriot's Day in Massachusetts). Both events have assembled a deep and talented field of world class athletes. Here's a look at who will be on the starting line for these two 26.2 mile races and who might be the first to the finish line:

Flora London Marathon

The 2005 Flora London Marathon recently lost two of the field's best runners to injury, as Ethiopia's Haile Gebrselassie and Gezahegne Abera both were forced to withdraw from the April 17th race. Gebrselassie, a two time Olympian and possible the greatest distance runner ever, was slowed by a bout of tendonitis in his left Achilles tendon and was unable to complete the necessary training for London despite signing a 3 year agreement with London. Abera, the 2000 Olympic Champion and 2001 World Champion, reportedly has recovered well from tendon surgery last fall but has also indicated that he has not been able to log the volume of mileage required to race a world class marathon. Despite Gebrselassie and Abera being absent, London's field is still one of the best ever assembled. Kenya's trio of Paul Tergat, Sammy Korir, and Evans Rutto collectively own the two fastest marathons and the fastest debut marathon ever run. The list of runners with big-time credentials is extensive, led by two-time London Marathon champion Abdelkader el Mouaziz, World marathon champion Jaouad Gharib of Morocco, ING New York City Marathon champion Hendrik Ramaala, Olympic champion Stefano Baldini of Italy, and Kenyans Daniel Njenga and Joseph Ngolepus. Jon Brown leads the list of Great Britain's top entrants.

Great Britain's Paula Radcliffe is the class of the women's field. In fact, if the elite British men aren't on top of their game, Radcliffe might just be the country's top finisher. Like Ramaala, Radcliffe is coming off a major victory last fall in New York City. She will again be challenged by a strong core of Kenyan runners, led by Margaret Okayo, Tegla Laroupe, Susan Chepkemei, and Joyce Chepchumba. Ireland's Sonia O'Sullivan is also one of the top names in the field.

PICKS: If conditions are ideal for racing, look for a very fast race on the pancake flat London course. Rutto, despite showing tremendous potential (wins in both London and Chicago), might not be at 100%. Tergat, despite owning the world record, has finished in the runner-up spot more than the winner's circle despite running very fast times. El Mouaziz knows how to win against a fast field, having won twice in London. Baldini and Ramaala will hope to duplicate terrific marathon efforts from last fall. For the ladies, Radcliffe will run from the front and make people chase her. No one in the field has the leg speed to drop her on her hometown course. Men: 1st - Korir 2:06:13, 2nd - Tergat 2:06:19, 3rd - Rutto 2:07:10. Women: 1st - Radcliffe 2:19:47, 2nd - Okayo 2:21:00, 3rd - Chepkemei 2:21:54.

B.A.A. Boston Marathon

The Boston Marathon has announced an elite field of over 30 runners from 13 different countries that will toe the line in Hopkinton to compete in it's 109th running on Patriot's Day. Timothy Cherigat, the defending champion at Boston, will return and is reportedly fit and ready. The men's race will feature Cherigat title defense against fellow countryman and 2004 runner-up Robert Cheboror, who won the prestigious Rotterdam Marathon last fall in 2:06:23, the 2nd fastest time in the world in 2004. Wilson Onsare of Kenya has also run sub 2:07 and should be in the mix. Other top runners with sub 2:10 credentials include 2003 Boston runner-up Benjamin Kosgei Kimutai, and road racing specialist Paul Koech of Kenya. American Alan Culpepper, who placed 12th overall in the Olympic Marathon last year after winning the U.S. Trials race earlier in the year, has the ability to challenge the Kenyans. Hailu Negussie of Ethiopia, Mohamed Ouadi of France, Pavel Loskutov of Estonia, and Kenya's Stephen Kiogora are all expected to return to Boston after strong performances in 2004. U.S. half-marathon champion Ryan Shay will also join Culpepper in Boston.

The ladies field is led by three-time winner Catherine Ndereba, who earned a silver medal in the 2004 Olympic Marathon. Ndereba hopes to become Boston's first 4-time ladies winner ever, but she will have her world cut out for her racing against a field that can boast five of the top ten finishers from the 2004 Olympic Marathon and five national record holders. Ethiopia's Efenesh Alemu (last year's runner-up and 4th at the Olympics), Olivera Jevtic of Serbia, (6th), 2003 Boston champion Svetlana Zakharova of Russia (9th), and Italy's Bruna Genovese (10th) all posted strong Olympic efforts. Look for three-time Olympic medalist Gete Wami of Ethiopia, Eri Hayakawa of Japan, Romania's Nuta Olaru, Lyubov Morgunova of Russia, Zhor El Kamch of Morocco, and 2001 Boston runner-up Malgorzata Sobanska of Poland to all be in contention.

PICKS: Like London, this one is wide open. The Kenyans always race well at Boston, and this year's contingent is as strong as ever. Look for favorites Cherigat and Ndereba to hang round the lead group through the Newton hills before making a serious move. If Culpepper or Shay reaches Kenmore Square first, it will be the first time since Greg Meyer's 2:09:00 in 1983 that an American has won the Boston Marathon. Men: 1st - Cheboror 2:08:34, 2nd - Cherigat 2:09:04, 3rd - Culpepper (sentimental U.S. pick) 2:09:33. Women: 1st - Ndereba 2:23:58, 2nd - Zakharova 2:24:40, Sobanska 2:25:06.

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