

WHAT SPORT WOULD PRODUCE THE BEST MARATHONERS?

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Whenever a well-known celebrity publicly announces that they will be participating in a marathon, the talk begins. Can they finish? How fast will they run? How do the rich and famous train? Do they sweat like the rest of us? In recent years, the list of celebrity marathoners has grown. Oprah, "P" Diddy, Will Farrell.....none ran fast but all were able to complete the 26.2 mile distance and live to talk about it. Lance Armstrong, Pete Sampras, George Foreman.....there's been plenty of talk of these great athletes giving the marathon a try. How well would they do? And how does the conditioning requirements of their individual sports carry over to marathon success? Here's a look at some of the major sports and how its athletes would fare at the marathon distance with the proper training:

BASEBALL – This is a sport of hand and eye coordination, which means little in marathoning. While most baseball players possess great physical strength, stamina and endurance are not at the top of the list of requirements for baseball success. Starting pitchers rarely work into the 8th inning anymore. Who would be good? Derek Jeter and Johnny Damon might possess the ability to at least complete the distance if challenged to do so. Who wouldn't? Barry Bonds has bulked so much in recent years that he can't even jog out of the batter's box after a home run.

FOOTBALL – Another sport where strength and coordination mean a whole lot and the rest periods are more frequent than the motion. But football players are terrific athletes. New England Patriots quarterback Doug Flutie, best known for his Hail Mary pass back in his Boston College days, hosts a successful road race in Massachusetts each year and has been known to jump in a local 5K from time to time. I would bet that wide receivers like Randy Moss and Terrell Owens would do quite well as marathoners and even better as middle distance runners; offensive and defensive linemen would probably not.

BASKETBALL – Finally a sport where endurance plays a key role. Unfortunately running high mileage and vertical leaping ability play a contrasting role, so you won't see many NBA stars pounding the pavement in their spare time. Still, look to guys like Allen Iverson, Steve Nash, or Kobe Bryant to be tough at 26.2 miles, while Shaq has a better chance of shooting 80% from the free throw line than running a sub 8 hour marathon.

TENNIS – Retired tennis star Pete Sampras has recently told the New York Times that he is planning on competing in this fall's ING New York City Marathon. Elite tennis players are in shape, and Sampras has always been one of the better conditioned tennis players on the court. How well that translates to marathon success remains to be seen.

GOLF – I'm always curious why athletic ability does not directly translate into how far one can drive a golf ball off the tee. Middle-aged men with big bellies who have golf club memberships and play a few times a week will crush strong endurance athletes every time. So don't look to golfers, despite their ability to walk many miles on four consecutive days, to become marathon runners. Tiger Woods would be an exception; his athletic drive allows him to succeed at whatever he does. And former British Open champion Justin Leonard finished the Houston Marathon a few years back. Big John Daly would be voted "least likely to become a distance runner" but would hold his own in the post-race refreshment line.

CYCLING – Here's a sport comprised of many former distance runners. Runners will often switch to cycling to recover from injuries and realize that they enjoy traveling faster than the 10 or 11 mile per hour max than running allows. There's been plenty of talk how Lance Armstrong would fare as a distance runner. Armstrong is a freak of nature who has been tested with an incredibly high Vo2 max. This, combined with his determination, would make Armstrong a tremendous distance runner had he chosen this path instead of the bike.

BOXING – Add George Foreman's name to the celebrity list of athletes turned marathoners. Foreman has publicly stated that he plans on competing in the Boston Marathon in 2006 to prepare for a comeback fight next summer. While Foreman isn't the first boxer that comes to mind when you think distance running potential, I would venture to say that because of their demanding training routine, boxers would make excellent runners. Remember how Rocky Balboa transposed himself from Philadelphia street bum to endurance athlete by running up flights of stairs with dozens of spectators in awe?

In summary, there are elite athletes in every sport that would probably excel in whatever activity they chose to compete in. The beauty of distance running is that almost anyone can compete, and those who do the work usually finish ahead of those who do not. The next time you turn on ESPN, think about the work that these athletes had to do in order become skilled enough to earn a living playing a game. With the proper preparation, quite a few of these athletes could become very good distance runners if that was the path they chose.

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