

HANDICAPPING THE U.S. OLYMPIC MARATHON TRIALS

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Special to the Bulletin

The United States Men's Olympic Marathon Trials will feature one of the strongest fields ever assembled and an assortment of talent that will be putting everything on the line for the honor of a trip to Beijing as an Olympian. The November 3rd race takes place in New York City's Central Park, with approximately 150 of the best American distance runners competing for a top three finish. The Trials race will precede the ING New York City Marathon, which takes place the next day. The Big Apple should be as busy as ever next weekend.

The "top three quality" format is simple and fair; any United States citizen who has run a certified marathon in 2 hours, 22 minutes or faster within a specific time frame leading up to the Trials race can compete. The top three finishers, provided they have already earned an Olympic "A" qualifying standard, make the team, while 4th place stays home. Compared to many other countries which select their Olympians via Committee, reputation and personal bests mean nothing, and there are no automatic bids. The Central Park layout will also be a challenging one, with the course beginning in Rockefeller Center and entering the park a mile later for a multi-loop criterion. The race will utilize a similar finish to the New York City Marathon.

Strength and tactics will play a major role in the Trials race. The mix of proven veteran runners, young guns with top track credentials, and relative unknowns out for a single shot at Olympic glory, will provide for an entertaining and competitive event. Here's a look at how the top runners stack up and odds to make the Olympic team:

ABDI ABDIRAHMAN, Tucson, AZ (2:08:56) Odds 3:1 – Abdirahman possesses excellent track speed and has proven himself to be a top contender, recently finishing runner-up to marathon World Record Holder Haile Gebrselassie at the New York City Half Marathon (a 1:00:29 PR). A three-time U.S. champion and two-time Olympian at 10,000 meters, Abdirahman also finished a strong 5th in last year's ING New York City Marathon. He has run extremely well over the past year and should be a solid bet if he is in contention late in the race.

ALAN CULPEPPER, Lafayette, CO (2:09:41) Odds 10:1 – Many feel that if Culpepper is healthy and fit, he would be the favorite. That's a strong complement given the company Culpepper will be in. Content to keep a low profile, the 35 year-old Culpepper is a two-time Olympian, winner of the 2004 Trials race, and a proven veteran in championship races. His strong 12th place finish at the 2004 Olympic Games in Athens was overshadowed by Keflezighi's silver medal effort. Culpepper followed that effort with a 13:25 personal best at 5,000 meters and back-to-back top five finishes at the Boston Marathon in 2005 and 2006. Although a recent struggle with anemia caused him to drop out of the New York City Marathon last fall, Culpepper showed everyone that he was far from through by winning the 2007 USA National Cross Country Championship in February. Culpepper now holds U.S. national titles on the track, roads, and in cross country. How Culpepper holds up on the rolling Central park layout remains a key factor.

PETER GILMORE, San Mateo, CA (2:12:45) Odds 25:1 – After a strong 8th place finish in then 2004 Trials race, Gilmore has consistently shown improvement. Gilmore has posted top finishes in the 2006 Boston Marathon (7th in 2:12:45), 2006 New York City Marathon (10th in 2:13:13), and the 2007 Boston Marathon (8th in 2:16:41 in less than ideal conditions).

RYAN HALL, Palo Alto, CA (2:08:24) Odds 6:1 – Two races make Ryan Hall a distinct Olympic Trials race favorite. His 59:43 American record at the Houston Half Marathon served notice that Hall was fit and a contender at the longer distances. His 2:08:24 marathon debut in London in April put an exclamation point on that fact. What Hall lacks in marathon experience he more than makes up for in youth and short distance credentials.

MEB KEFLEZIGHI, Mammoth Lakes, CA (2:09:53) Odds 9:2 – With a silver medal from Athens to his credit (the first by an American male in 28 years); "Meb" certainly has the credentials to steal the Trails race. Keflezighi has never won a major marathon, but he has contended in many and earned runner-up honors in big races. Although he has been hampered by injuries this season, Keflezighi certainly has the talent and experience for a top three finish in New York.

KHALID KHANNOUCHI, Ossining, NY (2:05:42 AR) Odds 20:1 – A bad marathon for Khannouchi is faster than 99% of the field's personal best. The 35 year-old U.S. record holder has struggled with injuries and hasn't run well since a 2:07:04 run at the London Marathon in April 2006. But we have seen Khannouchi struggle in tune up races prior to record runs, so anything is possible. Injuries kept him from competing in 2004. In he can remain healthy, look for Khannouchi to be a definite wildcard in this race.

DATHAN RITZENHEIN, Eugene, OR (2:14:01) Odds 12:1 – In 2004, a third career stress fracture in his foot knocked "Ritz" out of the Olympic Trials. However, an injury to Bob Kennedy put Ritzenhein on the team at 10,000 meters, and the experience proved valuable. Coach Brad Hudson has worked with Ritzenhein at the marathon distance, and his 26.2 mile debut in New York City last fall was a successful one.

BRIAN SELL, Rochester Hills, MI (2:10:47) Odds 15:1 – As an integral part of the Hanson-Brooks-sponsored team, the

hard working Sell thrives off of the blue collar image that has allowed him to steadily progress at the marathon distance since leading a majority of the 2004 Trials race in Birmingham before fading to 13th place. Sell owns U.S. titles at the half marathon and 25K distances and finished 4th in the 2006 Boston Marathon and 6th in the 2006 Chicago Marathon. Sell wont sit back and kick with the track stars over the final 5K; instead look for him to push the pace early and often in Central Park.

Finally, consider a dark horse that may break through with a world class performance when it counts most. In 1984, New Englander Pete Pfitzinger dealt American record holder Alberto Salazar his first-ever loss in Buffalo by running away from the field early and holding on for victory. Four years later, relative unknown Mark Conover earned an Olympic berth by winning the Trials race against a talented field. The unlucky 4th places finishers from the past two Trials races, **Scott Larson** (2:14:57 PR) and **Trent Briney** (2:12:34), could both break through with big races. **Clint Verran** (3rd Olympic Trials, 2:14:12 personal best), **Dan Browne** (3rd place finisher at the 2004 Trials, 2:11:35 marathon best), and **Ryan Shay** (2:14:08) all have been rumored to be training extremely well and possess the credentials and experience to earn an Olympic berth. Then there's the runners new to the marathon that have qualified by virtue of their 10K credentials; **Anthony Famiglietti** is a native New Yorker who has run 27:37 for 10,000 meters and knows the Central Park layout as well as anyone, while **Josh Rohatinsky** is a former NCAA XC champion that will also be making his marathon debut. Look for a large group early chasing someone willing to risk a long-shot effort out in front. With at least a dozen runners capable of winning and plenty more aiming for a top three finish, expect two great marathons in New York next weekend.

Race Coverage

Rumors has it that despite the lack of television coverage for the race, the 7:35am start will be shown live on NBC's "Today Show" and a 30 minute highlight show will be aired at 1:30pm that afternoon. The race will also be available on-line at nbcsports.com. Who do you think will earn a place on the Olympic team? E-mail your picks to kdcsikorski@sbcglobal.net.

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