

WOMEN'S OLYMPIC TRIALS COME TO BOSTON

By DON SIKORSKI
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Marathon weekend in Boston will be adding something special next Sunday when the United States Women's Olympic Marathon Trials come to town. The Boston Athletic Association will be plenty busy in coordinating not only the 112th Annual Boston Marathon on Patriot's Day (Monday, April 21st) but the Trials race as well, which will take place the day prior. 181 elite female runners will be competing in Boston for the opportunity of a top three finish and a spot on the United States Olympic team heading to Beijing this summer.

The Women's Marathon Trials race course will not mirror the Boston Marathon route. Rather, the race will take place on a multi-loop course within Boston and Cambridge and will incorporate the same Boston Marathon finish down Boylston Street. The Trails race is open to any female United States citizen who has run a certified marathon in 2 hours, 50 minutes or faster within a specific time frame. The top three finishers in next Sunday's race, provided they have already earned an Olympic "A" qualifying standard (2 hours, 39 minutes or better), will make the team. Here's a look at how some of the top contenders measure up and their odds to earn an Olympic birth:

DEENA KASTOR, Mammoth Lakes, CA (2:19:36) Odds 3:2 – Kastor represents to this field what Tiger Woods is to the Masters. The American record holder Kastor is a heavy favorite and considered by many experts to be a lock to make the Olympic team. In other countries selection processes, Kastor would be an automatic entry, but nothing is guaranteed in the marathon and Kastor will still have to get to the finish line in the top three to secure a birth in Beijing. A savvy, well-coached and well disciplined runner, Kastor (formerly Deena Drossin) has a running resume that includes 24 U.S. national titles and U.S. records for 10K (30:50.32), the Half Marathon (1:07:34, Berlin 2006), and the Marathon (2:19:36, 2006 London Marathon). Kastor's bronze medal performance in the 2004 Athens Olympic Marathon was the first medal at the marathon distance by an American since Joan Benoit's 1984 victory. While that resume alone doesn't guarantee success, Kastor possesses a strong track background and world class credentials, is head and shoulders better than the rest of the field, and should have little trouble earning a top three finish.

BLAKE RUSSELL, Marina, CA (32:31.9 10K) Odds 4:1 – The 32 year old Russell, an accomplished track runner, also brings to the table marathon experience (2:29:10 PR) and a recent strong showing at the USATF Cross-Country Nationals, where she finished an impressive 6th. The North Carolina Tar Heel alum has struggled with numerous injuries since the 2004 Trials race in St. Louis (where she led before finishing a disappointing 4th to miss a qualifying spot by one place), but is considered one of the favorites to earn a place on the team in Beijing in 2008.

ELVA DRYER, Gunnison, CO (2:31:48) Odds 6:1 – The 36 year-old Dryer is a 16-time NCAA Division II All-American and two-time U.S. Olympian. Dryer competed in the 5,000 meter distance at the 2000 Olympic Games in Sydney and finished 19th in the 10,000 meter final at the 2004 Olympic Games in Sydney. Her 2:31:48 marathon debut (12th female at the 2006 Chicago Marathon) proved her worth at the 26.2 mile race distance.

KATE O'NEILL, Palo Alto, CA (2:36:15) Odds 6:1 – Four years ago, the former 7 time All-American at Yale University earned the distinction of being the first Yale grad since Frank Shorter to complete in an Olympic distance race. Can O'Neill possibly match Shorter's marathon credentials? Maybe not, but she is clearly one of the favorites in this year's Trials race. Running in Boston, O'Neill will also have the local advantage working for her. O'Neill proved her worthiness both with an excellent marathon debut at the 2007 Chicago Marathon (finishing 3rd in an "A" standard qualifying time of 2:36:15) and an impressive win at the 2008 U.S. Half Marathon Championship in Houston this past January, running 1:11:57 to defeat a strong field of Trials contenders.

MARLA RUNYAN, Eugene, OR (2:32:17) Odds 20:1 – Runyan, who is legally blind, is a former heptathlete converted to distance runner. She has excelled at the 5K distance, winning consecutive USATF titles in 2001 – 2003 and finishing 2nd at the 2004 U.S. Olympic Trials. Runyan's marathon debut was a 2:27:10 clocking at the 2002 New York City Marathon, the second fastest American debut ever.

JOAN SAMUELSON, Freeport, ME (2:46:27) Odds 100:1 – Samuelson has the best credentials in the field. Fortunately for the rest of the field, Samuelson's (then Benoit) personal bests were set 25 years ago. Now at age 50 and the oldest qualifier in the field, Samuelson, a former American and World Record holder at the marathon distance, will forever be admired for her gutsy win at the inaugural Women's Olympic Marathon Race (Los Angeles 1984) where she outran a field that including marathon legends Ingrid Kristiansen, Grete Waitz, and Rosa Mota. In that first Trails race, Benoit-Samuelson had earned the win a mere 17 days following arthroscopic knee surgery. Samuelson ran a then personal best of 2:22:43 (1983 Boston Marathon), which at the time was nearly three minutes faster than any other woman had ever run for the distance. She would return after that Olympic win to run 2:21:21 at the 1985 Chicago Marathon. Clearly the crowd favorite, Samuelson is not expected to challenge for the sport on the team, but it will be a memorable return for Joanie in Boston.

The Men's Trails race yielded few surprises, with pre-race favorites Ryan Hall, Dathan Ritzenhein, and Brian Sell earning trips to Beijing. With there be a dark horse in the top three for the ladies? **Mary Akor** of California, a native of Nigeria, finished 18th in the 2004 Olympic Marathon Trials race, ran 2:33:50 at the 2006 Twin Cities Marathon, and won the 2007 Grandma's Marathon (2:35:40). Virginia's **Samia Akbar** ran 2:34:14 at the 2006 ING New York City Marathon and also has the credentials to challenge. **Michelle Lilienthal** is another runner in the field that has demonstrated continuous improvement in each of her marathon efforts. **Zolia Gomez** of Colorado (2:35:26 PB) is another strong contender. **Emily LeVan** of Wiscasset, ME is the fastest New Englander entered (2:37:01), while Simsbury's **Shannon McHale**, who qualified by virtue of her 2:42:08 performance at the 2006 Chicago Marathon, is the lone Connecticut runner in the field. Expect to see two terrific marathon races in Boston next weekend.

Race Update

USA Track & Field has announced that defending women's Olympic Trials Marathon champion and 3 time Olympian Colleen De Reuck of Boulder, CO will not compete at the U.S. Olympic Trials due to injury.....The top 3 finishers won't be the only runners walking away with something for their efforts. Prize money will be paid to the top 15 finishers with \$50,000 to the race's overall winner.....Reports are that live coverage of the 2008 Olympic Trials race will be shown on-line next Sunday at NBCSports.com/marathon. A 60 minute highlight show will be aired on MSNBC one week later (Sunday, April 27th) at 12:00pm.

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