

U.S. OLYMPIC TRACK TRIALS PREVIEW

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There are no free passes or automatic bids. A trip to the 2008 Summer Olympic Games for a Track and Field athlete will require a top three showing when the U. S. Olympic Track and Field Trials return to their sacred home at Hayward Field in Eugene, Oregon for the first time since 1972. Kicking off on June 27th is a 10 day event that is shaping up to be arguably the most competitive track meets ever run on U.S. soil. The “top three take all” format creates uncertainty for the heavy favorite and opportunity for the underdog (although runners will need to earn an Olympic “A” standard to compete in Beijing). Here’s a preview of the distance races and the top athletes expected to battle for an Olympic berth:

WOMEN’S 1,500 METERS (“A” standard 4:10.00; Final July 6th @ 4:05 p.m.) – Injuries and pregnancy have played a role in this event. Look for Erin Donahue, who had posted a 4:05.55 personal best last summer in Europe, and Treniere Clement, who has strung together a number of strong seasons recently, to contend up front. Christina Wurth-Thomas and Shannon Rowbury are two other strong runners to watch for. Former Stanford standout Sara Hall hopes to join her husband Ryan, a runaway winner in the Men’s Marathon Trials, on his trip to Beijing. Shayne Culpepper and Laura Fleshman are also expected to battle for Olympic honors, while Jen Toomey, a former U.S. national champion at the 1,500 meter distance, hopes to return from injury to compete in Eugene. Look for collegiate standouts like North Carolina’s Brie Feltnagle (defending NCAA 1,500 meter champion) to have an impact on this race as well.

MEN’S 1,500 METERS (“A” standard 3:39.00; Final July 6th @ 5:50 p.m.) – The Bernard Lagat versus Alan Webb matchup will earn all of the attention, but neither athlete will be granted a free ride in this one. Lagat’s American record of 3:29.30 placed him well ahead of the field in terms of credentials, but this race still needs to play out on the track, and American mile record holder Alan Webb certainly has the talent and the persona to make things interesting. Assuming Lagat and Webb run conservatively enough to qualify, it would leave just one lone remaining spot on the team. Look for Rob Myers (1,500 meter U.S. Indoor champion), Chris Lukezic (4th in 2004 Trials), and Leo Manzano (NCAA Mile Champion) to vie for that final spot. Andy McClary, John Rankin, Lopez Lomong, and Steve Sherer are other lesser-known runners that have run well as of late. Former Stanford miler Gabe Jennings, the 2000 Trials champion, is the wildcard and could also make the race interesting if he is able to find his former fitness.

WOMEN’S 5,000 METERS (“A” standard 15:28.00; Final July 4th @ 8:55 p.m.) – This one should be the Shalane Flanagan show. The former Marlborough, MA runner and NCAA Champion at North Carolina returned from injury stronger than ever and recently set American records indoors at 3,000 meters (8:33.25) and outdoors at 5,000 meters (14:44.80). She should be unstoppable if she can overcome any setbacks from recent foot injuries. Carrie Tollefson is another runner that was forced to fend off injuries and could be competitive if she returns to form. Jen Rhines, a two-time Olympian who recently set her personal best of 14:54.29 a few weeks ago, has decided to focus only on the 5,000 at the Trials and should head the chase pack behind Flanagan.

MEN’S 5,000 METERS (“A” standard 13:33.00; Final June 30th @ 9:40 p.m.) – Oregon legend Steve Prefontaine made this event famous in town. His ghost may still inspire those competing at Hayward Field that will look to his 13:22.8 Trials record, set in 1972, as the gold standard. Speedy Kenyan native Bernard Lagat is the defending World Champion at the distance and owns a 12:59.22 personal best, so Pre’s record may well go down. Nearly a dozen others have the ability to run that fast as well. Bolota Asmerom, who had competed for Eritrea at the 2000 Games before becoming an American citizen, has run 13:15 and showed continued improvement. Matt Tegenkamp opened some eyes with his 13:04 clocking at the 2006 World Championships. Former Massachusetts standout Jonathan Riley has Olympic experience and has continued to run well. Brett Vaughan and Ian Dobson will also challenge. Former NCAA Champion Adam Goucher and 2004 Trials champion Time Broe are two athletes that have been on the comeback trail from injury and could mix things up if healthy. Wisconsin alum Chris Kolinsky (13:12 PR) and Liberty’s Josh McDougal (2007 NCAA XC Champion) should be among the contenders as well.

WOMEN’S 10,000 METERS (“A” standard 32:45.00; Final June 27th @ 9:20 p.m.) – Deena Kastor, the winner at the U.S. Women’s Olympic Marathon Trials in April, has announced that she will skip the 10,000 this time around. And Shalane Flanagan may only compete at 5,000 meters. Those two decisions will affect this race greatly. Without those runners in the field, look for a more tactical event, with runners like Katie McGregor and Kara Goucher taking charge in the later stages. Alicia Shay will be the sentimental crowd favorite, running with the inspiration of her late husband Ryan, who collapsed and died 5 miles into the U.S. Marathon Trials in November. Former Notre Dame standout Molly Huddle is another up and coming challenger.

MEN’S 10,000 METERS (“A” standard 28:15.00; Final July 4th @ 9:20 p.m.) – This race field will be loaded with plenty of big name runners with a lengthy listing of credentials that missed the team in the marathon and will look to rebound at the 10,000 meter distance. Alan Culpepper (27:33 PR), Meb Keflezighi (2004 Olympic Silver Medalist in the marathon), Abdi Abdirahman (two-time Olympian), and Dan Browne (2004 Olympic Marathon team member) have each run under 28 minutes for the distance and each possess Olympic experience. Look for the 8K U.S. road champion Jorge Torres and Oregon protégée Galen Rupp to be right in the mix as well. James Carney (27:43 PR), Edward Moran (27:43 qualifier), and Josh Rohatinsky (2006 NCAA Cross-Country champion), lead a deep pack of contenders. Finally, the wildcard is Dathan Ritzenhein, who has already made the U.S. team at the marathon distance. With a top 3 finish in the 10,000, “Ritz” might be convinced to give his marathon spot to U.S. marathon record holder Khalid Khannouchi, who finished in the alternate 4th spot in New York.

Race Coverage

USA Network and NBC will share coverage of the 2008 U.S. Olympic Track and Field Trials beginning on Friday, June 27th. Expect on-line coverage as well at nbcsports.com. Check local listing for specific dates and times.

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