

U.S. WILL SEND OUR VERY BEST TO BEIJING

By **DON SIKORSKI**
Special to the Bulletin

When the smoke finally cleared from ten competitive days of Track and Field Trials at Eugene, Oregon's famed Hayward Field, the remains were a strong and very experienced team of American athletes that will be headed to Beijing to represent the United States in the Summer Olympic Games. While a cut and dry format of top three advance may sometimes result in superior talent being left behind, this year's Trials event whittled down the best performers in each event with few surprises, meaning this year's 126 athlete team will travel overseas possessing strong credentials. In fact, there are a total of 15 Olympic Track & Field medalists making this trip to Beijing, China next month. Led by marquee track names as Tyson Gay (100m), Jenn Stuczynski (Pole Vault), Bernard Lagat (1500m, 5000m), Adam Nelson (Shot Put), and Jeremy Wariner (400m), this year's U.S. team will take aim at the 2004 medal count of 25 earned in Athens. Here's a look at how the distance events shook out at this year's Olympic Trials:

Women's 1,500m: 1) Shannon Rowbury, 2) Erin Donohue, 3) Christin Wurth-Thomas - A new twist to this year's Trials effort was the requirement of athletes to earn an Olympic "A" standard prior to or during the Trials race. Therefore, strategies played a strong role, and those without the standard under their belts had to force the pace and wish for cooperating weather conditions. U.S. champion Treniere Clement was one of the few with the standard; she would lead a conservative pace early before faded to last. High school phenom Jordan Hasay stole the show by earning a place in the final and handing tough in that race, drawing "come to Oregon" chants from the rowdy Hayward field audience. But it was Duke alum Shannon Rowbury finishing clear ahead of the field down the race's final stretch, with former ACC rival Erin Donahue (UNC) and Christin Wurth-Thomas handing on for the 2-3 spots, that would get it done. Arguably the three athletes that have posted the strongest 2008 seasons to date will be making the trip to Beijing in this event.

Men's 1,500m: 1) Bernard Lagat, 2) Lopez Lomong, 3) Leonel Manzano - The series of semi-final races shook out the pretenders and left all of the big contenders in the most anticipated final of the Trials. Lopez Lomong and Leonel Manzano were recent NCAA rivals and were familiar with each other's ability, and both knew that any field featuring both Bernard Lagat and Alan Webb would have little room for error and availability for a top 3 finish. Like the women's final, the chances of earning the "A" standard of 3:36.6 in the Trials race looked bleak thanks to windy conditions and a conservative start. Gabe Jennings, the 2000 Trials winner and Olympic dark horse, was forced to assume the lead at the 400 meter mark in search of that elusive "A" standard. At 2:00 for 800 meters, the field jockeyed for position until Lagat finally moved to the front with 200 meters remaining and never let up. Webb would fail to challenge from the 5th position and gave way to both Lomborg and Manzano, who bring a youthful exuberance to the team. William Leer of the Oregon Track Club, looking strikingly similar to Oregon legend Steve Prefontaine, would squeak by Webb to earn a hard fought 4th place finish. Jennings would fade to last but showed flashes of brilliance and has vowed to be back in 2012.

Women's 5,000m: 1) Kara Goucher, 2) Jennifer Rhines, 3) Shalane Flanagan - Shalane Flanagan and Kara Goucher found themselves locked in battled with two laps remaining, strikingly similar to their 10,000 meter battle earlier in the week. This time they had company, and the result was different. The hometown hero Goucher would outkick fellow fan favorites Flanagan and Jen Rhines down the race's final stretch to earn the victory, with Rhines fending off Flanagan for runner-up honors. These three athletes made the Women's 5,000, along with the Men's 800 meter final, the most exciting final lap of the Trials.

Men's 5,000m: 1) Bernard Lagat, 2) Matt Tegenkamp, 3) Ian Dobson - The Men's 5,000, the race that Oregon legend Prefontaine made famous back in 1972, featured plenty of talent and parity. Whittled down to 5 contenders over the final two laps, it was the World Champion Lagat that would make victory look decisively easy in holding off Matt Tegenkamp and Ian Dobson to earn the first of his two Trials race victories (his 1,500 meter win would come on the final day). Bolota Asmerom (4th) and Chris Solinsky (5th) both ran strong efforts and narrowly missed a top 3 finish. Lagat is no stranger to the medal stand, having earned both Olympic medals for his native Kenya and World Championship gold medals at both distances for the U.S. He looks to repeat those honors in Beijing.

Women's 10,000m: 1) Shalane Flanagan, 2) Kara Goucher, 3) Amy Begley - Although the Flanagan-Goucher matchup received the bulk of the publicity, it was 3rd place finisher Amy Yoder-Begley, who like Goucher trains under Alberto Salazar's Oregon program, which would provide the drama. While Flanagan, the former Marblehead, MA native and current U.S. record holder, would have enough in the tank to fend off the courageous Goucher over the final 400 meters, it was Begley (the 2007 Manchester Road Race champion) that would run a blazing 15:33 over the second 5,000 meters and 67 seconds for the final lap to narrowly dip under the "A" standard of 31:45.0 with a clocking of 31:43.60, a personal best by 16 seconds, to earn the team's final spot in dramatic fashion. Both Kara Goucher and Shalane Flanagan have since announced that they will compete in both the 5,000 and 10,000 meter races in the Olympic Games.

Men's 10,000m: 1) Abdi Abdirahman, 2) Galen Rupp, 3) Jorge Torres - The men's 10,000 turned into a race of attrition, as an extremely fit and ready Abdi Abdirahman gave any would be contender very little change to get in a comfort zone., Only Oregon fan favorite Galen Rupp, another Salazar prodigy, and former Colorado standout Jorge Torres, would possess

the fitness level and the courage to maintain contact with Abdi, as the trio cleared the field near halfway and rarely looked back. The trio hung on valiantly to earn their places in Beijing. Adam Goucher, granted a controversial place in the field despite possessing one of the top 24 required qualifying times, would finish 7th and fail to earn a place on the team at either 5,000 or 10,000 meters.

This U.S. Track & Field team is clearly comprised of up and coming stars, many having posted their best performances in recent times. Look for a strong performance by the U.S. team next month at the 2008 Olympic Games.

Racing Update

Niantic's Way Hedding knows a thing or two about putting on a road race. And a race through the streets he once trained as a high schooler, followed by some food and beer and an afternoon at New London's Ocean Beach Park, is the perfect recipe for Hedding and his fellow running crowd.

On Saturday, August 2nd, The 46th Annual Ocean Beach / John & Jessie Kelley 11.6 Mile Road Race takes place at 9:00am sharp. 1957 Boston Marathon winner and two-time Olympian Johnny J. Kelley won the inaugural race back in 1963, running against a total of 18 other competitors. The event is now named after both Kelley and his late wife Jessie, a friend to many runners throughout Southeastern Connecticut. Now, the state's oldest shoreline road race (and CT's second longest standing event behind the Thanksgiving Day Manchester Road Race), continues to be a summertime tradition for area runners.

The Kelley Race has always been a terrific opportunity for runners to get in a quality training effort and enjoy the camaraderie of their fellow runners. Gary Nixon (57:33) and Agnus Ruane (66:57) have held the Kelley course records since 1985. New Britain's Eric Blake and Norwich's Melissa Perkins-Banas are the defending champions. This year's race will feature professional timing by SNERRO, live music by the band "Run For Cover" on the boardwalk, complimentary refreshments, multiple age division awards, and a complimentary day at the beach. Entries are available at www.moheganstriders.org and race day applications will also be accepted. As always, the success of the event relies of volunteers, so call the Kelley Race Hotline at (860) 739-9927 or e-mail Race Director Hedding at heddingw@aol.com to help out. Hedding has also confirmed that he will gladly accept a post race beer at the Port 'N' Starboard Lounge Deck from runners thankful for the complimentary entry fee. Be sure to get to Ocean Beach next Saturday to run or volunteer at the area's premier race events.

Sikorski writes a twice-monthly running column for the Norwich Bulletin. His "Coach's Corner" column can be accessed at www.moheganstriders.org. He can also be reached by e-mail at kdcsikorski@sbcglobal.net.