

OLYMPIC MARATHON PRESENTS PLENTY OF CHALLENGES

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Competing in a 26.2 mile footrace against the best distance runners in the world is difficult. Factor in hot and humid conditions, poor air quality, acclimation to a foreign country, and the pressure of an Olympic stage and the difficulty barometer gets pushed to brutal.

There will certainly be plenty of runners in the Olympic Marathon field that are well acclimated to racing in warm conditions, and there has certainly been plenty of warm weather Olympic Marathons in the past. But Beijing's challenging conditions make this year's Olympic race more one of attrition and less of speed. History has dictated that the heavy favorites don't win on an Olympic stage, and the influx of financial incentives now available on the international road race circuit and large prize purses for major marathons, most of which are contested on fast, flat courses under ideal conditions, present a challenge to even get the very best marathon runners to the starting line in Beijing. Ethiopia's Haile Gebrselassie, the world record holder of the distance (2:04:53), was the biggest star to pass on the 26.2 mile race, instead opting for 10,000 meters of racing on the track where he hopes to rediscover his unmatched wheels that delivered gold medals in both 1996 and 2000. Gebrselassie feels he will also walk away from the Games with plenty left in the tank to take another shot at the Berlin Marathon in September, where he recorded his record setting performance. It's difficult to question Gebrselassie's decision when all of these factors are considered.

Even without the world record holder, the men's marathon field in Beijing will be as strong as ever. Geb's absence hasn't weakened Ethiopia's team much, which still features Tsegave Kebebe and Deribe Merga, each with sub 2:07 marathon credentials. And of course, any talk of marathon completion is sure to include the Kenyan runners. Fortunately for the rest of the field, Kenya can only bring three runners to the starting line, leaving plenty of quality Kenyan runners out of the Beijing field. Luke Kibet, the first Kenyan in 20 years to win a marathon gold medal at the World Championships last year, is a prime example. Despite earning only two silver and one bronze medal in their history, the Kenyan runners will again toe the line in Beijing as the favorites. London and New York City Marathon champion Martin Lel, with a 2:05:15 personal best that tops the field, Boston Marathon champion Robert Kipkoech Cheruiyot, and World Half Marathon record holder Sammy Wanjiru (who owns a 2:05:24 PR), will comprise the Kenyan team. Abderrahim Goumri of Morocco is another outstanding runner in the field that also possesses sub 2:06 credentials. Countryman Jaouad Gharib is a dangerous contender, while Japan's Atsushi Sato has run 2:07:13, is his country's half marathon record holder, and will hope to bring a strong tradition of marathon excellence from his country with him. And never rule out a runner like Italy's Stefano Baldino, the defending Olympic Champion with plenty of international experience. The American contingent will certainly hope to be competitive in Beijing as well. Ryan Hall leads the American resurgence and will expect even more, especially since his dominant performance at the Olympic Trials and a 2:06:17 best to his credit. Dathan Ritzenhein and Brian Sell round out a very strong American squad that will look to make their presence felt in Beijing.

Medal Prediction: GOLD Jaouda Gharib, Morocco SILVER Samuel Wanjiru, Kenya BRONZE Ryan Hall, United States

Defending champ out of Women's Olympic Marathon

The big new in the Women's race is the withdrawal of 2004 Olympic marathon champion Mizuki Noguchi of Japan due to injury. With their alternate runner also out due with an injury, Japan will be forced to send only two runners to the starting line in Beijing, big news for a country that has produced the winner of the last two women's Olympic marathons. Still, the field has plenty of name runners that are expected to contend for Olympic gold. 2004 silver medalist Catherine Ndereba of Kenya is expected to take aim at a second Olympic medal and has credentials to make her a strong contender to repeat. Great Britain's Paula Radcliffe, the world record holder (2:15:25) whose only marathon failure was a DNF at the 2004 Olympic Games, will look to erase that memory and add the elusive Olympic medal to her lengthy resume. Despite recent struggles with a stress fracture, Radcliffe is a resilient runner who rebounded from her disappointing effort in Athens to win the New York City Marathon just two months later. Radcliffe can never be counted out.

Ethiopian runners Gete Wami and Berhane Adere are both considered to be amongst the favorites. Wami is the World Marathon Majors champion and finished runner-up at both the London and New York City Marathons. Adere claimed the Chicago Marathon title in 2006 and 2007. Both are expected to challenge. Japan's Reiko Tosa, Russia's Galina Bogomolova, China's Zhou Chunxiu, and Kenya's Salina Kosgei all possess excellent credentials and have raced well at the marathon distance. On the American side, defending bronze medalist Deena Kastor, who at 36 will look for one last chance at Olympic glory, has run under 2:20 and will still be considered a viable threat. Magdalena Lewy Boulet, who with her aggressive front running surprised the field at the U.S. Trials race, and Blake Russell, a seasoned veteran with plenty of track experience, will carry the U.S. hopes with them in Beijing.

Medal Prediction: GOLD Paula Radcliffe, Great Britain SILVER Reiko Tosa, Japan BRONZE Berhane Adere, Ethiopia

On Air Coverage

Because of the time difference (Beijing is 12 hours ahead of Eastern Standard Time), finding when and how much television coverage will be dedicated to the marathon events is challenging. The women's race will take place on Saturday, August 16th (Beijing time) and is scheduled to be aired live at 9:30pm Eastern time. The Men's race Olympic marathon race is schedule to air live at 7:30pm on Saturday, August 23rd. Check your local listings to confirm.

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