

LONGHORNS

Herd of Longhorns headed to Beijing

U.S. team loaded with Longhorns

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A herd of current and former Longhorns are headed to the Beijing Olympics, and not many will be long shots.

Indeed, quite a few will be favored to win medals. But while many of those athletes have Texas-sized dreams and expectations, they will also have challenges.

For some Olympic veterans the obstacles will be greater than four years ago in Athens. For the first-timers, there's always the inexperience factor to overcome in what promises to be a very different setting when the games begin in less than two weeks.

Nineteen current or former University of Texas athletes will represent the United States in China. Five others with UT ties are competing for other nations. Four Longhorn coaches are headed to Beijing, too.

Bubba Thornton, the head coach of the U.S. men's track team, will have three of his own athletes from UT on his American squad. Swim coach Eddie Reese boasts a contingent of seven Longhorns, including the Texas trio of three-time Olympians Aaron Peirsol and Ian Crocker and two-time Olympian Brendan Hansen.

That famed trio brought home nine medals from the Athens Games four years ago but faces a tougher challenge in Beijing.

At last month's U.S. swim trials in Omaha, Neb., all three Texas exes looked more vulnerable than four years earlier.

At the 2004 U.S. trials, the three set five world records while winning five events, including Crocker's and Peirsol's victories over U.S. swimming superstar Michael Phelps.

This time around in Omaha, in a year of speedy new swimsuits and a slew of records, only Peirsol has set a new world mark, shaving a little time off his 100-meter backstroke record and equalling Ryan Lochte's standard in the 200 backstroke. In the 200 final, Peirsol just managed to out-touch Lochte, who presents a greater obstacle in the event than Phelps did four years ago.

"I have the utmost respect for that guy," Peirsol said of Lochte.

Hansen's struggles in Omaha cost him the chance to compete in one events.

After winning the 100 breaststroke at the trials in a slower time than he was shooting for, Hansen said, "I'm tired of not competing fast."

Then, he turned in the most puzzling swim of the trials as he failed to finish first, second or even third in his specialty, the 200 breaststroke.

"I don't have a clue what's wrong," said Reese, who has coached Hansen for eight years.

That loss scuttled an Olympic showdown in the 200 breaststroke between Hansen and his Japanese rival, Kosuke Kitajima.

Crocker, meanwhile, finished second to Phelps in the 100-meter butterfly and admitted that he was disappointed in his time and surprised how the gap had narrowed for some of swimming's big names, including him.

"I feel like every event on the men's and women's side, we've had a couple of names moving up. We've had people we don't see that are all of a sudden firing and getting a feeling for a run and making it," Crocker said.

One of those rising stars — considered by many to be the surprise of the trials — was Westlake's Scott Spann, who has recently transferred to UT from the University of Michigan. Hansen has vowed to help Spann beat Kitajima in the 200 breaststroke, but there's some serious work to do. Kitajima's world record is more than two seconds faster than Spann's winning time at the trials.

Reese said, however, "In the last four months he (Spann) has been the fastest improving swimmer in the breaststroke in the country, perhaps the world."

Like Spann, Texas ex Garrett Weber-Gale, the winner of both the 50 and 100 freestyle at the trials, has been coming on strong this year but lacks experience.

"This is the first I've raced individually in an international meet," Weber-Gale said, "so I'm excited about that."

After pulling off his upset in the 50 freestyle, Weber-Gale admitted he didn't even know who held the record in that event. Heading into 2008, the 50 freestyle record had been broken only once in 18 years. This year, it's been topped four times, with Australian Eamon Sullivan's 21.28 seconds the current standard; Weber-Gale's best time is 21.47.

In track, the most visible Texas ex should be Sanya Richards, and not just because of her striking outfits.

Since the 2004 Olympics, where she finished sixth, Richards has established herself as the world's premier 400-meter runner, but she aspires to more.

The outgoing Richards has acknowledged she wouldn't mind being the face of U.S. track and field, which has been searching for one since the fall from grace of Marion Jones.

Catching America's fancy is a tricky business, as only a few athletes in all the sports manage to do it at the Olympics, and the competition in that arena could be anyone from a pint-sized gymnast to a heavyweight wrestler.

Recently, Richards has been attracting attention in Europe.

"I'm not just chasing the money," Richards said before she left to race that circuit. "Coach (Clyde) Hart wants us to have enough meets before the Olympics."

While Richards provides the glamour for the Texas contingent, the grit could come courtesy of little Leo Manzano of Marble Falls. Manzano won the NCAA outdoor 1,500-meter title this year and has been moving up to the next level, international competition.

"It's going to be tough mentally and physically, and I've got to fight," Manzano said. "It's going to be an all-out war between all of us, and nobody is going to want to give an inch. I'm not racing against college people any more."

Other Longhorns who will have to battle to get to the medal stand include high jumper Andra Manson, decathlete Trey Hardee, shot putter Michelle Carter and sprinter Marshavet Hooker.

It's the Texas exes in diving, however, who may face the biggest challenge, to beat the Chinese and the rest of the world in Beijing.

Laura Wilkinson, the 2000 gold medalist in the 10-meter platform, will bank on experience, as will Troy Dumais on the three-meter springboard. Dumais will be in his third Olympics and looking for his first medal.

A different kind of challenge will be faced by Cat Osterman.

As a pitcher for the U.S. women's softball team, Osterman may be playing for the best team ever assembled.

It could also be the last U.S. Olympic team, as the sport will not be on the slate for the 2012 London Olympics and is applying for reinstatement, where it will have to beat out other contenders, including golf.

While Osterman and her teammates want to win gold, they know they are also ambassadors and saleswomen for the game they want to save.

At least Osterman should have luck on her side, wearing No. 8 in an Olympics that are, by design, starting a 8 p.m. on the eighth day of the eighth month of 2008.

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