

EVENT-BY-EVENT PREVIEW

Open Water Swimming 10K MARATHON SWIM

BY STEVEN MUNATONES

Similar to the NCAA bracketology fever that sweeps across America during March Madness, open water enthusiasts worldwide have formulated their opinions on who will emerge victorious in Beijing.

Unlike a shooter who can make his free throws, but cannot hit his 3s in the NCAA basketball tournament, becoming an Olympic 10K medalist requires an athlete to be firing on *all* cylinders. There is no room for error.

The swimmers have to be physically, mentally and emotionally ready to peak not only on that day, but they also must be ready to react to all kinds of situations that can hit them (literally) throughout the race:

- Miss a feeding? Everyone can deal with that. That's why the swimmers stuff gel packs in their suits.
- Get clocked in the head around the turn buoy? Happens all the time—just hope your goggles don't come off.
- Get boxed in? That often spells disaster.
- Not taking it out fast enough? You can't medal from behind—the field is too fast.

Following are seven common themes that everyone seems to be preparing for come Aug. 20-21 when the women, followed by the men, compete in the 10K Marathon Swim at the Shunyi Olympic Rowing-Canoeing Park.

1. BRITISH SPEED

Without a doubt, the British swimmers—Cassandra Patten (who will also swim the 800 free), Keri-Anne Payne (who will also swim the 400 IM) and David Davies (who will also swim the 1500)—are going to take the race out fast...very fast...faster than any race has ever been swum before.

Patten, Payne and Davies have proven this strategy works for them.



[PHOTO BY WOLFGANG RATTAY, REUTERS]

ABOVE » Russia's Larisa Ilchenko will fight for position tucked behind the leader and will hold her position throughout the race until she blasts around the last turn and sprints to victory. Undefeated and confident, Ilchenko is the woman to beat.

Even if everyone drafts off them, they prefer swimming in clean water, staying clear of the blows and bumps common in the middle of the pack.

The question will be if the British can hold this pace—and hold off their competitors—during the stifling heat and humidity expected in late August in Beijing. If strong winds blow during the race, then this strategy becomes questionable.

2. SAVVY RUSSIANS

When the race is on the line, smart money is always on Russian Larisa Ilchenko and Vladimir Dyatchin.

Ilchenko has won five consecutive 5K world championships and three consecutive 10K world championships in rivers, lakes, oceans and bays—and against all comers, winning dramatically each time.

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Using similar tactics, Dyatchin, the 2003, 2007 and 2008 10K world champion, swims near the front of the pack, holding his position until the end. Whatever the pace, in whatever conditions, Dyatchin is a force with which to be reckoned.

With a training regimen built on a base of 120,000-meter work weeks, lots of speed work and hard two-hour open water swims in training camps around the world, the Russians have the speed, endurance and race savvy to take both 10K gold medals.

3. DUTCH EXPERIENCE

If gold medals were given for experience, the Dutch would be leading contenders. No athletes are more

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aware of their competitors or the ever-changing conditions than multi-time world champion Edith van Dijk or Maarten van der Weijden.

The lure of the Olympics drew 35-year-old van Dijk—with a 2-year-old child—back to racing. She retired after one of the most amazing weeks in open water history when she won the 10K and the 25K and added a 5K bronze over a six-day period at the 2005 World Swimming Championships.

The lure of life helped bring Maarten back from leukemia that fell him earlier in his career. During his long seven-year return to the elite level, Maarten developed a reputation for the most frantically furious closing of any 10K swimmer. His 6-8 height also helps him outtouch anyone at the end of the race.

4. LATIN AMERICAN DETERMINATION

Poliana Okimoto of Brazil and Andreina Pinto of Venezuela have something to prove.

Okimoto first made herself known when she earned silver medals in the 5K and 10K races at the 2006 World Championships. She has been knocking at the door ever since.

Pinto, although new to the elite ranks, was between second and fifth throughout the 2008 10K World Championships until her goggles were knocked off—twice—including around the last turn buoy when her cap also came off. They will both be in the fight for medals against their more well-known rivals.

5. GERMAN TOUGHNESS

Courageous. Grit. Indomitable. These terms define the German stars, Thomas Lurz and Angela Maurer. They can deal with any condition and any competitor, whether the water is cold or warm, calm or turbulent. Their position can be in front or behind, the pace can be slow or fast—Lurz and Maurer will be there.

Swimming stroke-for-stroke down the finish chute, it is rare that Lurz loses. Like a BMW (one of his sponsors), Lurz is top-of-the-line and considered a medal favorite.

The 32-year-old Maurer is a mother and has seen everything open water competition has to offer. Similar to her



longtime Dutch rival, it is unlikely that Maurer will medal, but there is no doubt that she will fight for a top-5 finish.

6. EUROPEAN TACTICS

You can count on the wily Europeans to pull out all the stops on race day.

Although the race may look like the Tour de France with a large pack of athletes together, there will be no domestiques, as in cycling. You can throw out any team tactics—it will be every person competing for his or her own glory.

On any given day, Spain's Yurema Requena, Jana Pechanova of the Czech Republic, Aurelie Muller and Gilles Rondy of France, Russia's Evgeny Drattsev, Italy's Valerio Cleri, Greece's Gianniotis Spyridon, Belgium's Brian Ryckeman and Petar Stoychev of Bulgaria can medal.

7. POTENTIAL HEROES

Lastly, there are five special competitors who could have the swim of their lives and earn a medal.

Chloe Sutton of Mission Viejo, Mark Warkentin of Santa Barbara, Australian hopeful Ky Hurst, Egyptian Mohamed El-Zanaty and Paralympian Natalie du Toit of Cape Town all have the experience, speed, toughness and endurance to harbor legitimate Olympic medal dreams.

Very importantly, these swimmers are hungry and peaking at the right time.

Sutton cannot only hang with the British duo, but she also has the potential to outduel Ilchenko down the straightaway sprint. If she can avoid the main pack and swim with Patten and Ilchenko, she is a clear medal favorite.

No one has made greater improvements than former USC Trojan Warkentin. His rapid upward trajectory in the open water world has made Warkentin's competitors take notice.

If the going gets tough, expect Hurst to be the last man to back down. A renowned ocean ironman Down Under, the Aussie is expected to finish in the top 5.

Mohamed El-Zanaty is an Egyptian contender whose wide shoulders can split a large pack faster than a bloom of jellyfish.

But the eyes of the world will be on the unlikeliest athlete at the Olympics: du Toit is not only a gold medal contender, but she is also the only Paralympian who qualified for an Olympic swimming final. Du Toit, who lost her left leg in a tragic accident, is carrying the hopes of those who have braved life's unexpected obstacles. ♦

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