

EVENT-BY-EVENT PREVIEW

Men's Swimming 200 METER BACKSTROKE

BY JOHN LOHN

HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

Defending Champion: Aaron Peirsol, USA, 1:54.95

World Record Holders: Ryan Lochte and Aaron Peirsol, USA, 1:54.32 (2007, 2008)

Most Titles: United States (6): Jed Graef (1964), John Naber (1976), Rick Carey (1984), Brad Bridgewater (1996), Lenny Krayzelburg (2000), Aaron Peirsol (2004)

Notable: This summer, the United States will try to run its gold-medal streak in the event to four. If Aaron Peirsol can repeat his title, he'll join Roland Matthes (1968-72) as the only back-to-back victors. Peirsol has always been one of the best big-meet swimmers in the world, and making history would be far from a surprise.

MEDAL CONTENDERS

Aaron Peirsol, USA: The reigning Olympic champion, Peirsol has been the most dominant performer in the event since 2001. While he finished second at last year's World Championships, it was his first loss in major competition in seven years and in no way signified that a decline was on the horizon. At the U.S. Trials, Peirsol waged an epic battle with Ryan Lochte, as both men battled stroke-for-stroke. At the touch, Peirsol had equaled Lochte's world record of 1:54.32, with Lochte just behind in 1:54.34. Come the final in Beijing, Peirsol could have a 1:53 performance ready to go, which might be needed as he and Lochte continue their rivalry.

Ryan Lochte, USA: The multi-event standout posted a world record at last year's World Champs, going 1:54.32 for the gold medal. Peirsol tied the mark at Trials, with Lochte just 2-hundredths back. Lochte didn't contest this event at the 2004 Olympics,

but he'll be among the favorites in Beijing if he's not worn out by his arduous schedule. If anything, he has proven to handle a big workload without losing much in the process.

Markus Rogan, Austria: The Austrian and Stanford product captured the silver medal at Athens. The bronze medalist at the World Champs last year, Rogan collected the gold medal earlier this year at the Europeans with a 1:55.85. Rogan certainly will be in the medal mix once again and, while it's a daunting task, he might have the best chance of anyone to challenge Peirsol or Lochte.

Arkady Vyatchanin, Russia: Vyatchanin, ranked sixth in the world last year with a 1:57.14, placed fourth at Worlds. His best in 2008 is 1:56.66, and he has a silver medal to his credit from the European Champs. His career best is 1:55.44 from two years ago. He'll need to go that fast again for a podium position.

Ryosuke Irie, Japan: Irie is the best medal hope for Japan, and he has a 1:54.77 from June to show his worth. The time is an Asian record and makes him the fourth-fastest swimmer ever in the event. He's made great strides from his best of 1:57.30 last year that ranked seventh globally.

Gregor Tait and James Goddard,

Great Britain: Tait and Goodard are a solid 1-2 punch for the British in the 200 back, but they'll still need to improve about a second for medal contention. The two Brits clocked 1:56.67 (a Commonwealth record) and 1:56.82, respectively, at the British Trials in April.

Other Challengers: Hayden Stoeckel (1:56.75) and Ashley Delaney (1:57.53) will represent Australia in Beijing after posting solid times at their Trials. Romania's **Razvan Florea**, the European Champs bronze medalist, has also been 1:57.53 this year, and Germany's **Helge Meeuw** (1:57.92) is another European to watch. ♦



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ABOVE » Markus Rogan, AUT