

EVENT-BY-EVENT PREVIEW

Men's Swimming 4 X 200 METER FREESTYLE RELAY

BY JOHN LOHN

HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

Defending Champion: United States (Michael Phelps, Ryan Lochte, Peter Vanderkaay, Klete Keller), 7:07.33

World Record Holder: United States (Michael Phelps, Ryan Lochte, Klete Keller, Peter Vanderkaay), 7:03.24 (2007)

Most Titles: United States (14): 1920-24-28-48-52-60-64-68-72-76-84-88-96, 2004

Notable: While the world record currently sits at 7:03-plus, it's conceivable that the winning time could dip under the seven-minute mark in Beijing. Crazy thinking? Not really. The United States could have four men produce sub-1:45 splits, which would get the job done.

MEDAL CONTENDERS

United States: Since the 2004 Olympics in Athens, the Americans have gone with a familiar foursome—Michael Phelps, Peter Vanderkaay, Ryan Lochte and Klete Keller. There's a chance that unit could line up in the final in Beijing, but there's also the potential that a small shakeup could occur, primarily with Keller.

At the U.S. Trials, Phelps (1:44.10) and Vanderkaay (1:45.85) finished 1-2 in the 200 free final. Ryan Lochte clocked 1:45.61 in the semifinals, but scratched the final. He'll be a lock on the relay. While Phelps could go 1:43-low, look for Vanderkaay and Lochte to be 1:44 for their legs.

The question mark comes into play with Keller, who was fourth at Trials (1:46.20). Keller, of course, is the guy who fought off Ian Thorpe for the gold medal in the 800 free relay at Athens, and he has plenty of international experience. But he'll have to beat out Ricky Berens, Dave Walters and Erik Vendt for the last spot in the

championship heat. Berens made a real case at Trials by finishing third with a personal-best 1:46.14. Whatever the order, gold is a near guarantee.

Australia: Before the United States regained control in 2004, the Aussies owned this event for several years. Kenrick Monk has been a rising star on the international scene and figures to join forces with Patrick Murphy and Nicholas Sprenger. Obviously, Grant Hackett has been a force for years, and will be a key factor in the Aussies' chase for a medal.

Canada: A little more than a year after winning the bronze medal at Worlds, the Canadians should factor again into the medal equation. Brent Hayden, a versatile freestyler whose best work comes in the 100 and 200, will headline the lineup. Colin Russell has been sub-1:47, and Rick Say is a veteran Olympian. Look for Andrew Hurd and Brian Johns as other options.

Italy: The Italians won the gold medal at the European Championships earlier this year and can be considered

as medal contenders. Filippo Magnini and Massi Rosolino have been at the top of the sport and give Italy a strong starting point. Nicola Cassio is another athlete who will be counted on for a contribution.

Other Challengers: Great Britain finished just outside of the medals at the 2007 Worlds. It will need to ratchet it up to be in contention in Beijing. The British can choose from David Carry, Ross Davenport, Robbie Renwick, Andrew Hunter and Ben Hockin to fill the four positions up for grabs. **Russia,** which picked up the silver medal at the European Championships, will battle for a podium position in China. Andrei Kapralov and Danila Izotov, a surging youngster, will be two of the top guns. Other members of the relay could include Alexander Sukhorukov, who has been sub-1:47, and Nikita Lobintsev, who has gone 1:47-low. Evgeni Lagunov is another possibility. ♦



ABOVE » (From left) Peter Vanderkaay, Klete Keller, Ryan Lochte and Michael Phelps, USA (after world record in 2007)

[PHOTO BY WOLFGANG RATTAY, REUTERS]