

EVENT-BY-EVENT PREVIEW

Women's Swimming 200 METER INDIVIDUAL MEDLEY

BY JOHN LOHN

HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

Defending Champion: Yana Klochkova, UKR, 2:11.14

World Record Holder: Stephanie Rice, AUS, 2:08.92 (2008)

Most Titles: United States and Ukraine (2): USA—Claudia Kolb (1968), Tracy Caulkins (1984). UKR—Yana Klochkova (2000-04)

Notable: The gold and silver medalists from the last Olympics, Yana Klochkova and Amanda Beard, won't be in the medal picture. Klochkova didn't look sharp at the recent European Champs, and she doesn't seem to have what it takes for a podium spot. As for Beard, she failed to make the U.S. team in the event.

MEDAL CONTENDERS

Stephanie Rice, Australia: Wu Yanyan's drug-tainted world record in the 200 IM was finally taken down by Rice at the Australian Olympic Trials with a time of 2:08.92. The 19-year-old Aussie has obviously made major strides since last year's World Championships, where she was the bronze medalist in both medleys. In the 200 IM, she has sliced off 2.50 seconds in a year and has become one of the biggest names in Aussie swimming. Now, we'll see if she can hang with the likes of Katie Hoff.

Katie Hoff, USA: The North Baltimore Aquatic Club star is the defending two-time world champion and American record holder in this event. Hoff can do it all and will likely be the female face of the Beijing Games. Last year, Hoff ranked No. 1 in the world with a best time of 2:10.13, and she went 2:09.71 for the American mark at the U.S. Trials. Hoff has the potential to win five individual gold medals in Beijing.

Natalie Coughlin, USA: Since

she contested this event at the 2000 Trials, Coughlin hasn't paid much attention to the 200 IM. However, a change in heart during the spring led her to consider putting it on her Beijing schedule. Coughlin set an American record of 2:09.77 in June (that has since been broken), and she finished second at the U.S. Trials (2:10.32). Superb on the butterfly and backstroke legs, Coughlin's key is maintaining a solid breaststroke before turning to freestyle.

Kirsty Coventry, Zimbabwe: Four

years ago, Coventry earned a bronze medal in the 200 IM at the Athens Games. Earlier this year at the Missouri Grand Prix, she clocked 2:10.08, currently the fourth-fastest time of 2008. The former world record holder in the 200 back, she was the silver medalist at the World Champs in 2007 and will attack an arduous schedule in Beijing—one that will include both backstroke events and the 400 IM.

Yana Klochkova, Ukraine: Klochkova may be the defending two-time Olympic champion, but it's clear that she has considerable work ahead to challenge for a medal. Still, it's not like Klochkova is washed up and unable to make the final—she went 2:12.16 last year to rank fifth in the world. Her best this year is 2:14.51.



ABOVE » Stephanie Rice, AUS

[PHOTO BY MICK TSIKAS, REUTERS]

Alicia Coutts, Australia: Because she was swimming in a championship final that featured Stephanie Rice's world record, the Aussie's swim of 2:11.87 at her Olympic Trials was lost in the shuffle. It's unlikely that Coutts will battle for a medal, but a spot in the final is certainly within reach.

Other Challengers: A trio of European athletes could manage their way to spots in the championship final. Spain's **Mireia Belmonte** went 2:11.16 at the European Champs in March and looks to have a big upside. **Hannah Miley** is the top British entry and has been 2:11.46. Also, keep an eye on France's **Camille Muffat**, who went 2:11.15 in April. ♦