Women's Swimming
200 METER BACKSTROKE

BY JOHN LOHN

HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

Defending Champion: Kirsty Coventry, ZIM, 2:09.19

World Record Holder: Margaret Hoelzer, USA, 2:06.09 (2008)

Most Titles: Hungary (3): Kristina Egerszegi (1988-92-96)

Notable: The United States hasn't won the 200 back gold medal since 1972, when Melissa Belote took top honors. It is the longest drought for the American women.

MEDAL CONTENDERS

Margaret Hoelzer, USA: Hoelzer is the reigning world champion in the event, thanks to her effort of 2:07.16 last year in Melbourne. But her biggest swim came at the U.S. Trials, where she set the world record in 2:06.09. It was a superb effort, with Hoelzer getting more dominant on each lap. A teammate of defending champion Kirsty Coventry when they were in college at Auburn, Hoelzer is obviously enjoying her new training environment with King Aquatic Club of Washington.

Kirsty Coventry, Zimbabwe: The 2005 world champion in the event seems to have rocketed up a level, not that she wasn't a star before. After all, she's the defending Olympic champion and set a world record of 2:06.39 in February. Although Hoelzer has since dropped that mark, Coventry still holds the short course world record. She heads into Beijing as a major threat, with a 2:05 possibly being needed for the gold.
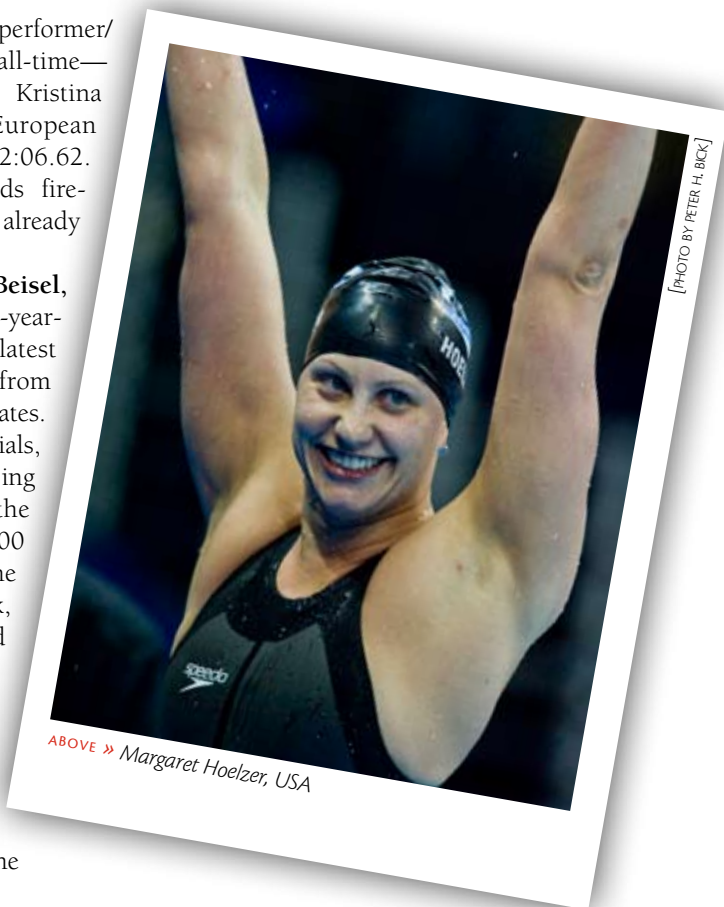
Laure Manaudou, France: The Frenchwoman is best known for her freestyle talents and ability in the 100 back, but there's no doubt she has the ingredients to push for gold in the 200 back. Her endurance played a part in the 2:06.64 effort she uncorked at the French Championships in April. The time—fourth performer/performance all-time—was just off Kristina Egerszegi's European standard of 2:06.62. Manaudou adds firepower to an already stacked field.

Elizabeth Beisel, USA: The 15-year-old is the latest teenage star from the United States. At the U.S. Trials, she earned Beijing berths in the 400 IM and 200 back. In the distance back, she clocked 2:06.92 to become the second-fastest American in history and to throw her hat into the medal ring.

Reiko Nakamura, Japan: A staple on the international scene for several years, the Japanese standout won the bronze medal at last year's Worlds, where she swam 2:08.54. She's also the reigning Olympic bronze medalist from Athens. At the Japanese Trials, Nakamura checked in with a time of 2:08.80. Two months later in June, she improved to 2:08.34. However, it looks like she'll have to go into the 2:06-mid range—at minimum—to contend for a medal.

Meagen Nay and Belinda Hocking, Australia: A pair of teenagers will lead the Aussie squad in the event. Meagen Nay broke through at Trials with a 2:08.55. The second slot, meanwhile, went to Belinda Hocking, who punched her ticket to the Big Show with a 2:08.93.

Other Challengers: Outside of the top guns, a tightly bunched pack has emerged. Included in that group is China's **Zhao Jing** (2:07.76), who certainly would like to flourish in front of the home crowd. Great Britain's medal hopes lie with **Elizabeth Simmonds** (2:08.79) and **Gemma Spofforth** (2:09.70). Russia's **Anastasia Zueva** is a major force in the 100 back, but her 200 back isn't shabby, evidenced by her 2:08.56 mark this year. Frenchwoman **Alexianne Castel** went 2:07.94 at the French Trials and could be a factor. Japan's **Hanae Ito** (2:08.80) is the other representative from her country. ❖

ABOVE » *Margaret Hoelzer, USA*