

EVENT-BY-EVENT PREVIEW

Women's Swimming 200 METER BREASTSTROKE

BY JOHN LOHN

HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

Defending Champion: Amanda Beard, USA, 2:23.37

World Record Holder: Leisel Jones, AUS, 2:20.54 (2006)

Most Titles: Russia (3): Galina Prozumenshikova (1964), Marina Koshevaia (1976), Lina Kachushite (1980)

Notable: Of the 19 times the 200 breaststroke has been contested in the Olympic Games, the United States has won the event only twice. While Sharon Wichman prevailed in the 1968 Games in Mexico City, Amanda Beard earned the title four years ago in Athens.

MEDAL CONTENDERS

Leisel Jones, Australia: What Michael Phelps is to the 200 butterfly on the male side, Jones is to the 200 breast among women. Jones, the silver medalist at the 2004 Games, has separated herself from the competition in a big way. Her world record stands two seconds faster than any other athlete in history, and she has the fastest nine performances all-time. If Jones, who dominated the past two World Championships in this event, performs to her potential, a sub-2:20 is not out of the question.

Rebecca Soni, USA: The University of Southern California standout has emerged as the top American threat for a medal. Last summer, Soni won the national title in the event and popped the second-fastest time in the world with a 2:23.36. At the U.S. Trials, she lowered her best time to 2:22.60—not far off Amanda Beard's American record of 2:22.44 from 2004—to become history's third-fastest performer.

Megumi Taneda, Japan: Taneda ranked third in the world last year with a national record 2:23.85. The Pacific

Rim has been solid in this event for many years, and Taneda is simply carrying forth that tradition. She clocked 2:23.94 in June, and if she can handle the pressure of the Olympics, this 21-year-old should battle for a medal.

Amanda Beard, USA: Although she basically took three years off from the sport, Beard came through at the U.S. Trials, finishing second in 2:25.13 and qualifying for her third Olympic team. The defending Olympic champion will be hard-pressed to challenge Leisel Jones for gold, but a medal is a definite possibility. Beard is one of the toughest racers around, and her experience will be beneficial.

Kirsty Balfour, Great Britain: Balfour had a strong showing at the World Championships last year, sharing the silver medal with American Megan Jendrick in 2:25.94. Her season-best 2:25.45 was good enough for a ninth-place ranking in 2007. However, her best so far this year is 2:27.09—a far cry from her fastest time of 2:24.04, set over two years ago.

Yuliya Efimova, Russia: The youngster from Russia, who is rapidly improving and grabbing attention on the international scene, was the seventh-fastest performer last year with a 2:25.23. She lowered the national record to 2:24.09 in March, and there's reason to believe this 16-year-old will



ABOVE » Rebecca Soni, USA

[PHOTO BY PETER H. BICK]

continue to drop her time and be a factor in the medal race.

Other Challengers: Korea's **Seul-Ki Jung** was fifth in the world last year, thanks to her winning time of 2:24.67 at the World University Games. Another to keep an eye on is Japan's **Rie Kanetou**, who went 2:25.62 in 2007. Canada's **Annamay Pierse** was sixth in the world last year in 2:25.22. Also keep an eye on Austria's **Mirna Jukic**—who set a European record of 2:23.90 in late July—and South Africa's **Suzaan Van Biljon**. Overshadowed by Leisel Jones, Aussie **Sally Foster** has been 2:24.81 in June, and China's **Qi Hui** will have the Beijing crowd behind her. ♦