

EVENT-BY-EVENT PREVIEW

Women's Swimming 4 X 100 METER FREESTYLE RELAY

BY JOHN LOHN

HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

Defending Champion: Australia (Alice Mills, Libby Lenton, Petria Thomas, Jodie Henry), 3:35.94

World Record Holder: Netherlands (Inge Dekker, Ranomi Kromowidjojo, Femke Heemskerk, Marleen Veldhuis), 3:33.62 (2008)

Most Titles: United States (14): 1920-24-28-32-48-60-64-68-72-76-84-92-96, 2000

Notable: The Netherlands enters the Olympic Games with the world record and, consequently, as the favorite to win the gold medal. The Dutch have not won the gold medal in this event since the 1936 Games in Berlin.

MEDAL CONTENDERS

The Netherlands: A year ago at the World Championships, the Netherlands finished third behind Australia and the United States. However, last March at the European Championships, the Dutch threw down the gauntlet by popping a world record of 3:33.62 with a team of Inge Dekker (53.77), Ranomi Kromowidjojo (53.61), Femke Heemskerk (53.62) and Marleen Veldhuis (52.62). That same quartet will be in Beijing as the gold-medal favorite.

Australia: Four years ago, Australia ended the United States' run of three straight gold medals. However, only two members of that squad—Libby Trickett and Alice Mills—will be in action in Beijing. Of course, Trickett—the world record holder in the 100 free at 52.88—is as good as it gets and has the ability to reel in any foe. Rising teenage star Cate Campbell (53.30) will also provide a huge spark for the Aussies, while Mills (54.28 at Trials) could handle one of the legs in the championship final. Other challengers for a relay spot include Melanie Schlanger, Lara Davenport, Shayne

Reese and Angie Bainbridge.

United States: The Americans will attempt to regain the gold medal behind the 1-2 combination of American record holder Natalie Coughlin and the ageless Dara Torres. The third and fourth positions at Trials went to Lacey Nymeyer and Jessica Hardy, but Hardy failed a drug test at Trials and did not accompany the team to Beijing. Among other possibilities are Julia Smit and Kara Lynn Joyce. Joyce was added to the team after Dara Torres scratched the 100 free. Although she didn't qualify at Trials, Katie Hoff remains an option.

Germany: The Germans set a world record of 3:35.22 in 2006, but only finished fourth at last year's World Championships. However, they still have Britta Steffen, who recently uncorked a 53.05 in the 100 free. The Germans have several relay options: Petra Dallmann qualified second in the 100 free (54.90), followed by Antje Buschschulte and Daniela Goetz, who tied for third (55.04), and Annika Lurz or Daniela Samulski could contribute as well.

France: The French were sixth at the 2007 Worlds. Alena Popchanka and Malia Metella are the top performers, and there's a possibility that Laure Manaudou could find a spot on the relay, although that scenar-

io is hardly a lock. Other potential members include Aurore Mongel and Celine Couderc.

Other Challengers: Sweden doesn't have the depth of several other nations, but they have a pair of standouts that could aid in a run to the championship final. Therese Alshammar has been a longtime staple on the international scene and among the world's premier sprinters, and Josefin Lillhage is another well-established force. Again, **China** is a mystery, yet Pang Jiaying has been 54-low this year and figures to be a leading performer for the host nation. Also keep an eye on **Great Britain**, led by Francesca Halsall and with other solid options in Caitlin McClatchey and Mel Marshall. ♦



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ABOVE » Marleen Veldhuis, NED