

EVENT-BY-EVENT PREVIEW

Women's Swimming 400 METER INDIVIDUAL MEDLEY

BY JOHN LOHN

HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

Defending Champion: Yana Klochkova, UKR, 4:34.83

World Record Holder: Katie Hoff, USA, 4:31.12 (2008)

Most Titles: United States (4): Donna de Varona (1964), Claudia Kolb (1968), Tracy Caulkins (1984), Janet Evans (1988)

Notable: Although she captured the gold medal in 1996 in Atlanta, Ireland's Michelle Smith prevailed on the strength of performance-enhancing drugs. Smith was later banned from competition by FINA for tampering with a test sample.

MEDAL CONTENDERS

Katie Hoff, USA: Making her second appearance in the 400 IM at the Olympics, Hoff will be the favorite for gold, having set the world record of 4:31.12 at the U.S. Olympic Trials. Superb in each stroke, the defending two-time world champion owns a devastating breaststroke leg that fuels her back half. It would be difficult to imagine anyone overtaking Hoff down the stretch. Still, it won't be a walk in the park either. Look for a world record to win the gold—and going sub-4:30 is not out of the question!

Stephanie Rice, Australia: The Australian made her name known on the international scene when she set a pair of medley world records at the Aussie Olympic Trials in March. The bronze medalist in both medley disciplines at last year's Worlds, Rice seems to be the top competition for Hoff with her 4:31.46 from Trials.

Elizabeth Beisel, USA: The 15-year-old, in some ways, is mirroring what Hoff did earlier in her career. She has broken onto the international scene in a big way, with her second-place swim of 4:32.87 at the U.S. Trials making her a

legitimate medal contender. Beisel first emerged internationally as a qualifier for the 2007 World Champs in the 200 back. Her arsenal is obviously expanding, and it can be suggested, based on their times, that Beisel is well ahead of where Hoff was as that age.

Kirsty Coventry, Zimbabwe: At last year's World Championships, Coventry was absent from the medal stand after being disqualified during the preliminary session. Don't expect the Auburn product to be missing from the hardware hunt in Beijing—she has already been 4:34.25 this year. Coventry has enjoyed a sterling year preparing for Beijing, excelling in a number of events, most notably the backstrokes.

Hannah Miley, Great Britain: Like many of her countrywomen, Miley has stormed to the forefront of the international scene. At the British Olympic Trials, Miley joined elite company when she stopped the clock in 4:33.24—evidence that her country is again developing top-flight swimmers.

There might be better-known names around, but Miley can't be counted out in an event with incredible depth.

Alessia Filippi, Italy: The Italian won the gold medal earlier this year at the European Championships and has been 4:36.68 in 2008. Filippi is a multi-dimensional athlete who excels in a variety of events, but the 400 IM is her specialty. Still, with the talent surrounding her in the event, Filippi will have to cut considerable time to join the medal race.

Other Challengers: There seems to be a sizable dropoff after the leading contenders for the medal positions. Where sub-4:40 formerly put an athlete in good standing for a podium push, that is no longer the case. Among some of the other names to watch—but of longshot status—include Hungary's **Katinka Hosszu** and Russia's **Yana Martynova**. Both women have gone under 4:38 this year. ♦



ABOVE » Katie Hoff, USA

[PHOTO BY PETER H. BICK]