

EVENT-BY-EVENT PREVIEW

Women's Swimming 4 X 200 METER FREESTYLE RELAY

BY JOHN LOHN

HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

Defending Champion: United States (Natalie Coughlin, Carly Piper, Dana Vollmer, Kaitlin Sandeno), 7:53.42.

World Record Holder: United States (Natalie Coughlin, Dana Vollmer, Lacey Nymeyer, Katie Hoff), 7:50.09 (2007)

Most Titles: United States (3): 1996, 2000-04

Notable: The 800 free relay has only been an Olympic event for the women since 1996, with the United States capturing each gold medal.

MEDAL CONTENDERS

United States: The Americans will head to Beijing as the defending world champions and the heavy gold-medal favorites. Katie Hoff and Natalie Coughlin, who were members of the world record-setting squad at last year's World Championships, will lead another strong relay, capable—on paper—of destroying the world record and, perhaps, going below 7:45. Coughlin figures to lead off and has the ability to be in the mid-1:55 range (her best is 1:56.43 as the leadoff on last year's relay). Hoff set an American record in the 200 free at the U.S. Trials (1:55.88), and rising teenage star Allison Schmitt was only 4-hundredths behind (1:55.92). Julia Smit (1:56.73) is the primary contender for the last spot, but also in the relay pool are Caroline Burckle, Kim Vandenberg and Christine Marshall. Add up USA's top four times from the 200 free, and you get a 7:44.96!

Australia: Australia has a plethora of options to consider for the final in Beijing. Libby Trickett might be best known for her sprinting ability, but her 200 free talent should make her a member of the Aussie relay.

Bronte Barratt and Linda Mackenzie have swum under 1:57 this year and figure to land a berth. Stephanie Rice, the world record holder in the 200 IM, has clocked 1:57.31 this year, a time that certainly should put her name into the Aussie equation. Other possibilities include Angie Bainbridge and Melanie Schlanger, each of whom has swum 1:58-low this year.

France: Although she dropped the event from her individual Olympic program, Laure Manaudou is likely to be the go-to girl for the French. After all, she's the world record holder and reigning world champion with a mark of 1:55.52. After Manaudou, France will likely have Aurore Mongel, Alena Popchanka and Coralie Balmy to help put the French into the medal race. Each of those women has been under 1:58 this year.

Great Britain: The Brits had a great showing at the European Championships and will be among the top nations in this event. Rebecca Adlington has swum 1:56.66 this year and will find solid support from Caitlin McClatchey, who is on the cusp of joining the 1:56 club. Look for Jo Jackson and Melanie Marshall to be a part of the medal push.



[PHOTO BY PETER H. BICK]

ABOVE » Natalie Coughlin and Katie Hoff, USA

Italy: The Italians snagged the bronze medal at the European Champs, and with Federica Pellegrini, they have a "hammer" who can compete with any individual in the world. Alessia Filippi, best known for her medley and distance free ability, will be another contributor.

Other Challengers: The former world record holder, **Germany**, will go to work with the likes of Annika Lurz, Petra Dallmann and Britta Steffen, while the **Netherlands** will turn to the sprint tandem of Marleen Veldhuis and Inge Dekker. Also, don't count out **Japan** and **China**, capable of going in the mid-7:50 region, although that's likely not fast enough to sniff a medal. ♦