



from the editor

E. Garry Hill

STOP ME IF YOU'VE HEARD THIS ONE BEFORE: “How many members of the U.S. team got seasonal bests during the World Championships? For the biggest meet of the year you'd think the number would be high, but in reality, of the 92 American athletes who competed in individual events at the WC, a mere 14 (7 men, 7 women) reached high-water marks.”

Actually, longterm readers *have* heard that one before. That's my lead sentence to my October '03 column, from a piece titled “Paris—more proof that the U.S. Trials meets need to be moved later.”

Beijing—more proof that the U.S. Trials meets need to be moved later

You know what comes next: the dismal Beijing figures. Despite the fact that the number of U.S. athletes climbed from 92 to 118, the number notching seasonal bests dropped from 14 to 12 (8 men, 4 women).

So the ratio of Americans who PRed at the meet dropped from 14.8% to 10.2%. Compare that 10.2% (which actually drops to 9.3% if you consider finals-only) to 37.1%. What's 37.1? Of the 140 individual medals which were handed out at the meet, that represents the 52 athletes who did it with a seasonal best. In other words, the rest of the world performed at a rate about 4X superior to Team USA when it came to being ready on the big day. As for being ready to stand on the top step of the podium, 19 out of 47 gold medalists (18.5%) turned that trick.

You can make numbers say just about anything you want, but to me these ones seem to say rather clearly that if you want to medal, you'd better get an SB at a high rate, and if you want the medal to be gold, the SB rate better be even higher. Note that of the U.S.'s 5 individual golds in the meet, 4 of them did come from people who got a seasonal best.

For the record, here's my '15 Beijing Hall Of Fame, U.S. Division: LaShawn Merritt (twice), Bryshon Nellum, Galen Rupp, Shadrack Kipchirchir, Aries Merritt (twice), Kerron Clement, Christian Taylor, Ashton Eaton, Candyce McGrone, Allyson Felix (twice), Phyllis Francis (twice) & Tianna Bartoletta. Note that all but 4 of those—Rupp, Kipchirchir, Aries Merritt, Clement—actually scored a lifetime best at the meet, not just a seasonal one.

So as this year's early dreams of Project 30-like success became a reality that wasn't even Project 20, where should the finger point? For me it's my old friend the timing of the American selection meet, which I've carped about for years (most recently in December '14 in which I predicted much doom & gloom for Doha '19 unless USATF is moved).

The 8-week gap from Eugene to Beijing just put too many variables into play. Note that the unexpected 29-medal haul from London in '12 came after just a 4-week break. Even though there are historical examples of longer gaps working out better than this year's, the margin for error just gets smaller and smaller every time.

Compound that with the lack of a domestic summer season and an international schedule that has contracted mightily—in addition to featuring a big dead spot prior to the OG/WC—and you get a U.S. team that goes mightily flat, through no fault of its own. They've simply been forced to be at their best far too early.

As I concluded in '03, “The way the system is currently working, USATF goes out and builds the best looking damned car on the block in June but when August rolls around there just isn't much gas in the tank and the body definitely needs a polish-job.”

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