

# Marathon Grab

by John Farrow

In a move to demonstrate that the United States will no longer play second fiddle to any country in the men's Olympic marathon, the U.S. Olympic Committee announced recently that every man in the world capable of running a sub-2:10 marathon has been granted U.S. citizenship. As such, each is now eligible for the U.S. Olympic team and ineligible to run for any other country. "This is our way of showing our commitment to this country's Olympic effort," said USA Track and Field CEO Craig Masback.

Shut out in the Olympic marathon medal race since Frank Shorter's historic win in 1972 and silver medal in 1976, American distance runners have chafed under frequent criticism. "It's not that we're slow," said Rod DeHaven, the sole American man to qualify for the 2000 Olympic Marathon in Sydney, Australia. "We're also white."

Needless to say, Danny Grimes, chair of the USA Track and Field Long Distance Running Executive Committee, was clearly pleased with the recent developments. "It all started when we got Khannouchi. He helped us out with the North African guys, Gebrselassie and Mouaziz. Then Tergat and Ndeti came on board and we had the Kenyans standing in line."

"This move was not entirely unexpected," said *Washington Post* political columnist George F. Will. "The President is a runner. He was clearly bothered by the fact that we have only one guy who has ever won a medal. Being the boss, he just said to get it handled. The boys down in Foggy Bottom made a few phone calls and Cheney got everyone summer jobs over at Haliburton and it was a done deal. All they have to do is come in once a month to pick up their checks and pose for pictures."

"It's an honor to be a part of this system," said Gert Thys, picked up from South Africa as insurance in case Ronaldo da Costa, Antonio Pinto, William Kiplagat and Takayuki Inubushi all go down with injuries. "I'd be crazy to turn down the opportunity

to run on what will be, by default, the greatest team ever assembled."

Korean Bong-Ju Lee, the silver medalist in the 1996 Games, was something of a holdout, however. He refused to commit to becoming an American citizen until he had a chance to discuss the matter with his good friend Bill Richardson, now Governor of New Mexico. But after a plate of enchiladas at the Shed in Santa Fe and a few drinks at the Pink Adobe, he was soon on board.

The only world-class man not granted American citizenship was Frenchman Driss El Himer, who has a PR of 2:07:06. "The President was still peeved at what he saw as French obstructionism in recent United Nations Security Council actions concerning Iraq," said columnist Will. On offering a French runner American citizenship, Mr. Bush was emphatic: "Let him eat cake."

Bob Kempainen was the top American at the 1996 Olympic Marathon Trials but could do no better than 31<sup>st</sup> in Atlanta. He lamented this state of affairs. "Look, I want to win as much as anyone. Sometimes hard work can overcome shortcomings like being altitude challenged and whatnot. But then you throw in an unhappy childhood or something and it's tough to be competitive. I mean, when the Olympic Athlete of the Year is a teen-aged figure skater with zits, what are you going to do?"

One person clearly intrigued by these events was none other than New York Yankees owner George Steinbrenner, who openly contemplated the prospect of signing every major league baseball player to a Yankees contract. "It would certainly help our pitching staff," he said. "We'd probably only have to start some guys no more than a couple of times a year."

Not surprisingly, countries losing their top distance runners to the U.S. were not taking things lightly. Kenya was asking for loan guarantees while Ethiopia and South Africa were holding out for Jimmy Carter. Japan simply wanted Britney Spears to come back in concert.□

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