



Distance specialist Flanagan poised for double duty at Trials

Updated 6/27/2008 4:01 PM
By Dick Patrick, USA TODAY

EUGENE, Ore. — When her coach first suggested the possibility of an Olympic trials double in the 5,000 and 10,000 meters, Shalane Flanagan had one reaction.

"I thought he was insane," Flanagan said of John Cook after he pitched the idea last fall. She had never run the 10,000 on the track. "There's no way I was strong enough to do that. Just to make the team in one event is a monster task in itself."

She's had a change of heart. Flanagan, who turns 27 in two weeks, plans to be on the start line of Friday night's 10,000 at the track and field trials. She'll then come back Monday for the 5,000 semifinal leading to the July 4 final if she advances.

Flanagan is the U.S. recordholder at both distances, running 14 minutes, 44.80 seconds last year in the 5,000 and setting the 10,000 mark of 30:34.49 in May in her debut at the distance.

Flanagan's performances before the fans at Hayward Field will determine her plans for the Beijing Games in August. She needs a top-three finish to make the team but will need to see more for a Beijing double.

"In order to even consider running both in Beijing, I kind of need to win both," she said.

She could be forced to choose. "After the debut in the 10,000, I realize it plays a lot more to my natural strengths. However, my heart is in the 5,000. I absolutely love the event. It's very challenging, and I don't want to give up an event I don't feel like I'm tapped out in yet. I feel I have so much room for improvement."

Flanagan's competition in the 10,000 includes Kara Goucher, who last year earned a bronze medal in the world championships, becoming the first U.S. woman to win a worlds medal in the 10,000. The 5,000 field includes Jen Rhines, who finished seventh in last year's worlds, one spot ahead of Flanagan.

Flanagan is a different runner from 2004, when she was third in the 5,000 in trials and 11th in her semifinal in the Olympics.

While working with Cook, she has undergone a transformation as a runner after a foot injury nearly ended her career. Cook, who coached at George Mason University, served as a consultant to Flanagan for the foot problem, which had troubled her since 2004. Cook has developed several top middle-distance runners, including 1987 1,500 world champion Abdi Bile of Somalia.

After seeing eight doctors, Flanagan found Amol Saxena, a Palo Alto, Calif.-based podiatrist, who discovered she had an extra bone in her left foot. He removed the bone and repaired her posterior tibial tendon in a surgery in April 2006, causing her to miss the track season.

Once Flanagan resumed training, the focus for 2007 was improving speed. "She had to get faster. She was told in college she wasn't fast and aerobically tried to outrun everybody," Cook said of the North Carolina graduate who won three NCAA titles. "That only works at certain levels."

Flanagan, who lives in Pittsboro, N.C., set a U.S. indoor 3,000 record in February 2007, took the 5,000 mark in April and dominated the 5,000 in the USA Championships in June. "Then we kind of ran out of gas," Cook said.

Endurance was an emphasis this season. Flanagan trained with Shannon Rowbury and Erin Donohue, who are contenders for 1,500 berths, for three months at altitude in New Mexico. They also trained in Colorado Springs in the spring.

In between those trips, Flanagan set the 10,000 record. Cook thinks she is capable of lowering her 1,500 best of 4:05 to sub-4:00 and improving her 5,000 and 10,000 marks.

This time Flanagan doesn't think her coach is insane.