

MEN'S US OLYMPIC MARATHON TRIALS - Birmingham, AL 7 February, 2004

Sean Hartnett for *Track & Field News*

Men's US Olympic Marathon Trials

As competitors, officials and enthusiasts gathered in Birmingham at the starting line of the Olympic Marathon Trials, an ominous warning blinked from a portable electronic sign: SLOW - MARATHON - AHEAD.

Considering the snow flurries blowing in the wind and a field depleted by injuries to AR Khalid Khannouchi and defending trials champ Rod DeHaven, it was no surprise that Peter Clusener and Teddy Mitchell were the only brave soles to start the race at anything more than a warm-up pace.

The rest of the field hit the 3 mile post in 15:45 and it appeared as if American marathoners were in for another self-inflicted pummeling, as even the softened 2:15 A standard was now in play. What a way to start the Olympic Year.

Fortunately that 15:45 split was just too much for Brian Sell to stomach, and the point man for Michigan based Hansons-Brooks ODP decided to live up to his commitment to 2:12 pace. Sell sports gonzo sideburns reminiscent of the long-gone days of US marathon greatness in the 1970s and early 80s - and at 3 miles he began a determined bid to return American marathoning to respectability.

"I didn't want to run anything slower than 5:10 so I had to pick it up," Sell reasoned, and he began to churn out 5 minute miles. Spurred on by the hundreds of fans working the downtown circuit like a paved harrier race, Sell surged confidently to a 58 second lead at 15 miles.

An hour later the hard-charging 25 year-old was probably the only person in America that had better cause than Howard Dean to wonder 'what happened.' Let it be known that Mr. Sell and all parties connected with Keith and Kevin Hansons' Team - made this race.

That said, Alan Culpepper left no doubt that he was most capable of finishing this race as he dictated a 64:31 second half and sprinted away from Meb Keflezighi in the final 300 meters to close out a very respectable 2:11:41 win.

Dan Browne battled through some duress over the final miles and finished 3rd in 2:12:01 to claim the final spot on the Athens' squad.

Remarkably, this marathon that ended in a flurry - turned out to be the fastest trials race since the good-old days of 1980 and 84'. What a way to start the Olympic Year!

Marathon Trials Race Story

The self-selection process for the US Olympic Marathon team began in earnest ten miles into the Trials race as 86 competitors began to circle the spectator friendly 4+ mile loop in downtown Birmingham.

Brian Sell built a 30 second lead at 9 miles but a 4:52 burst from the pelleton to closed the gap to 23 seconds at 10 miles (50:56).

"I really didn't want to run much faster than five flat," Sell admits. "Hitting the crowds really motivated me, and there were a couple 4:51s and a 4:53 in there, and that might have sealed my fate a little early."

The chase pack offered little chase, chipping 67:08 at the half-mat, eventually falling a minute back before finally depleting patience reserves at 15 miles.

Nervous surging ratcheted up the pace, and culled David Morris, Clint Verran, and Kevin Collins from the ranks of contenders. Ryan Shay whose fine pre-trials form was foiled by hamstring misfortune was also dropped - along with Josh Cox and Keith Dowling.

Culpepper finished house cleaning tasks with a serious move at 17 miles noting "I wasn't trying to shake people. I was going with the wind, and just going on feel - and I felt good."

So good - that the ensuing 4:47 mile cut Scott Larson and Eddy Hellebuyck loose before they knew what hit them.

In the short span of ten minutes the Athens' team took shape as everyone's team favorites - Culpepper, Keflezighi and Browne - emerged majestically at the front of the shredded chase pack. Only Trent Briney managed to cover the big move.

That's right Trent Briney - yet another Hanson squad member who opened a lot of eyes with his 2:21:22 qualifier. Incredibly, two of Hansons' slowest qualifiers were competing fearlessly in their first serious marathons - and were in the hunt as the long-awaited Trials entered the final 10K.

Actually by this point Sell had become the hunted as he slipped over five minute pace, and his lead shrank 22 seconds at 20 miles (1:40:43). "I knew Meb, Alan and Dan were coming," Sell admitted, "those guys always finish strong."

The posse ramped up the chase with 4:51 mile that dropped Briney, and a 4:49 22nd mile sent them past the defenseless Sell. "I was trying to brace myself," Hansons' ace recalls of his futile efforts, "but when they blew by - my hair blew forward."

Culpepper kept the pace sharp with a 4:53 23rd mile that pulled Meb and Browne clear of the Team Hanson trio of the fading Briney and Sell, and Verran who was sweeping back up through the pack.

Browne fell off the pace three miles from the finish, leaving Culpepper and Keflezighi to match wits and gears as they had in numerous duels for US harrier and track titles.

"Culpepper is a great competitor," Meb offers, "and we always try to push each-other. He was trying to test me, but I came back to tell him "I'm still here."

"I was trying to see if I could get away from Meb," Culpepper admits. "He would stay with me, but he wasn't trying to get away from me so I realized that I didn't have to try to force the issue."

"There were some depletion issues," Culpepper adds as the pace slipped to 5:00 and 5:03 miles. "I felt strong and that I could maintain a good pace, but if I tried to accelerate I could tell my legs were shot."

Culpepper put all that aside when Meb edged ahead 300 meters from the finish. "That spurred me," and the 31 year old Colorado distance runner that is still known for his miler's gear launched the most rewarding sprint of his career.

Alan CULPEPPER

The Trials' Best Runner and Coach

Despite the valued contributions of the many marathon training centers, Alan Culpepper's Trials victory underscores the fact that the rugged individual niche remains viable for American runners. Like his predecessor 2000 Trials winner Rod DeHaven, Culpepper is self-coached and trains rather singularly.

"I try to determine what are the crucial aspects of a competition, and focus on that," Culpepper notes of his planning. "I then go over as many scenarios as I could, and Shayne and I would spend many a night just dissecting them,"

Culpepper nailed a 2:09:41 debut in the 2002 Chicago Marathon, then chose to focus on the track last year. "As soon as Paris was over," Culpepper admits, "my whole thinking process was based on the marathon. I tend to work best when I can focus on one task and venue for competition. That way I can tailor my training exactly for one race."

Culpepper has also demonstrated that he thinks well on his feet in competition. "This race challenged almost every facet of your running, your training, your psychology. You had to constantly assess the competitors, the wind, the changes, the subtleties - emotionally it took a lot."

The toughest challenge for Culpepper in Birmingham was staying patient. "I like to make my presence known by being right up at the front, mentally I do better if I'm right up in it. But I was hoping someone would get it going."

At 17 miles, Culpepper couldn't restrain himself,

"Lets just start racing," he thought as he finally hit full stride. "I didn't think about cutting into the lead until after 20 miles."

With that Culpepper began a long drive to the finish line averaging 4:54 for this final 9.2 miles, and sprinting to 'the biggest win of my career."

MEB & DAN BROWNE Make the Team

Faced with illness, injury and compromised fitness, Meb Keflezighi faced his biggest challenge just getting to the starting line of the Trials.

"It was a little iffy," Keflezighi's notes of his preparations. "Due to the flu that I got really bad and the tendonitis on my knees, I did not put in a lot of miles. I didn't go over 100 miles a week. We took a conservative way to get ready for this and to try to make the Olympic team. If I had taken risks, I might not have been in Alabama."

Meb adds, "Patience was a big thing, both for preparations and for the race. Brian Sell made a big move and we had to contend with him. He was a minute ahead and moving along well, but being patient paid off for me today."

Late in the race Meb had to restrain his competitive nature. "I was in racing mode. I wanted to drop a 4:45 or 4:48, but I wasn't ready for it, and my legs felt the pounding." Reluctantly Meb admits "I was always protecting 3rd place, because you never know in a marathon."

For third placer Dan Browne the greatest struggle came in the final miles of the Trials race.

"Alan put a strong move in and I lost a lot of ground," Browne recalls of his difficulties in the 24th mile. "I had to really suck it up. My stride buckled a few times when I tied to push and catch up to them. I realized that I just needed to maintain and reestablish a rhythm, as opposed to forcing something."

Browne regained form after a tormented mile and secured his spot on the Athens' team, noting "I knew I was so close to home, and finally seeing that finish line - that experience that you are going to make an Olympic team is just great."

TEAM Hansons-Brooks ODP

Making the biggest splash in Birmingham was the Hansons-Brooks ODP team. The upstart team from Rochester, Michigan produced the most qualifiers (eight), the race protagonist (Brian Sell), the big surprise (4th place finisher Trent Briney), and a rare 2nd Olympic alternate (5th placer Clint Verran).

Kevin and Keith Hanson began the program in 1999 as an extension of their competitive, coaching and commercial interests in the sport, and with

commitments of housing, medical, training and employment support, the brothers have poured a million dollars into the team.

The brightly clad Hansons-Brooks team has been making a name for themselves over the past two years, but in Birmingham it became clear that the ODP stands for Olympic Development Project.

Sell's performance in Birmingham came as no great surprise after his fine 59:18 to chase Meb home last fall's New Haven 20K. But the only blip on Briney's screen was a 65:04 tune-up with his mates at the Houston half a month before the trails..

Sell a 25 year-old Pennsylvanian via St. Francis University, and Briney also 25 from UC - Colorado Springs have both logged three years of volume orientated training with Hansons team in Rochester, Michigan. This was the first time they had toed the line with Olympic berths on the line - albeit with two of the slowest qualifying times.

This was by design as the Hansons believed that a fast fall marathon was not conducive to good Trials effort in February. Moreover, Sell had run a very solid 63:56 in a hot IAAF World Half in Vilamora the week before running 2:20:02 in Chicago.

Briney's 2:21:22 came more by default as Keith Hanson notes "Brian was in the 3rd year of our 10K program and was in danger of not hitting our minimum expectation of getting a trials qualifier. The marathon was basically the easiest one to get."

Briney adapted well to the marathon workload over the winter, running with Hanson's A team and gathering fitness. But what most striking was that he expected to be in the hunt. "Our training was geared for 5:00 pace," Briney offers, "and I had been able to run with Clint and Brian. For me the key was being to recognize and handle the surging as comfortably as possible without panicking."

Keith Hanson notes in comparison, "Trent has never been able to better Brian in any workout we do. Brian has always been a tough-minded courageous runner. but he was probably capable of a much better performance."

Almost lost in the deep Hanson squad was Clint Verran, at 28 he is a five year veteran of the inaugural Hanson team who closed to finish fifth with an A standard 2:14:37.

For now Briney and Verran's Olympic participation is dependent on defections. Trials winner Alan Culpepper seems clearly committed to the marathon. Meb and Dan Browne have expressed some interest in keeping their Olympic options open. Stay tuned.