

Reflections of Beijing Decathlon

Bryan Clay has defined his decathlon career in terms of major championships wins and medals. In turn they have defined him. Early in Beijing Bryan separated himself from the field with his unique combination of speed, agility and strength. He was flawless through the first morning break and everyone knew it. He won the first two events (100 meters and long jump) and PR'd in the third (shot put), all in driving rain.



Facing the biggest field (40) and the worst weather conditions in Olympic Games history this meet was over early. After an acceptable high jump and 400 meters, his first day lead was 88 points over eventual silver medalist Andrei Krauchanka. But given Bryan's 2nd day skills, it was doubtful anyone would challenge him.

On day two the rest of the field faded. Bryan survived the clobbering 4 barriers to win his hurdle race and then set a meet record in the discus. He followed by vaulting 5 meters and speared a 232 foot javelin. After nine events his lead was an insurmountable 491 points. Clay survived the 1500 meters, an event in which he has taken criticism for in the past. "I was exhausted," Bryan remarked afterwards. "I had nothing in my legs...my main concern was finishing the race and getting it all done, and being at the top of the podium,"

Specifically he has been criticized for not posting faster times, an absurd proposition made by those who believe that all decathlon performances need to be roughly equal. Absurd. Sure, consistency is important, but not at the expense great individual performances. In the decathlon the goal is to maximize the score, not minimize the standard deviation of points. Of course there are some training routines that he could adopt to maximize his 1500 meter performances but it would make no sense if doing so detracts from his other performances.



Regardless, in Beijing Bryan Clay decisively proved that his is the world's best all-around athlete. For Clay the victory was deeply satisfying on several levels. He was the pre-meet favorite in a track meet where numerous favorites flagged. By the time he lined up for the 100 meters on Thursday morning in a driving rainstorm, Americans had one a single field event medal, a silver in the shot put where many had predicted a red-white-blue sweep. With dropped batons, no-heights and injuries, favorites didn't exactly play well at these Olympics. Ask USA sprint relay teams. And, in spite of being the defending silver medalist, the reigning world indoor heptathlon champion, and the possessor of the world's best 2008 score, many were not convinced that Clay was that good. They are now. Being the favorite did not deter Clay.

Every American decathlete carries excess historical baggage into the Olympic arena. Inevitable references to, Bob Mathias, Rafer Johnson, Bruce Jenner and Dan O'Brien abound. American decathletes, beginning with Jim Thorpe in 1912, won 11 of the first 21 Olympic gold medals. Clay loves to compete and now no one can deny his place in the event's history.

Bryan's win was one for the little guy. Ironically, Thorpe and Clay were/are the same size....just under 6 feet and both weigh in at 185 pounds. In 1912 Thorpe was seen as a "big" athlete. In 2008 Clay is the smallest of world class athletes. Thorpe's thickness came in the chest and neck, Clay in his thighs. And Clay's victory was also one for the clean athlete. It is refreshing that a small, drug-free athlete turns out to be the world's best. It is why there is a lot of pride in Bryan's accomplishments.

This was an uncommon week. My anticipation the Clay's chase for gold started with a day-long Jury Duty call on Monday, a spatter of good golf scores at Piney Apple of Tues-Wed-Thur, more media phone calls on Wednesday when the decathlon started (when it was actually Thursday am in Beijing). A computer malfunction and a lot of lost sleep trying to adjust to the 12 hour time difference. Throughout I marveled at Clay's composure, will and focus. He never looked jittery, kept his momentum going in spite of a mediocre high jump, and never gave the competition hope.

Now he'll most closely be identified with his Olympic victory. Unlike other small, comfortable invitationals or meets done in your backyard, the Olympic decathlon is a constant stressfest, a grinder that pushes athletes to the breaking point, and often beyond. In actuality there are two goals for every decathlon. The first is to finish and the grading system is pass/fail. In Beijing 40 % of the field either no marked somewhere along the way or simply dropped out, a rate not topped by any Olympic t&f event, even the marathon. Right from the start his competitors fell by the wayside. 2004 bronze medalist Dmitry Karpov, a Borat looking Kazak, made it through just one event. Teammate Tom Pappas, a 3 time Olympian, sustained a foot injury and made it only to the long jump. By the end of the first day a dozen had dropped out. This was a test of survival and Bryan survived better than anyone.

The second goal revolves around score and place. I'd say that an 8791 score (the world's 2nd highest, and he also holds the first of 8832) and the gold medal speak for themselves.

Like all the great ones, Woods, Jordan, Ali, Clay is driven to win. Records are secondary for him. He doesn't run up the score as some basketball coaches do, but he does win. And he wins big. His mild mannered demeanor and faith can be misleading. He is the product of a Christian institution, Azusa Pacific University, where daily religious services are mandatory. I once worried that this type of faith could get in the way of being a competitor, but '92 Olympic decathlon bronze medalist Dave Johnson (of Dan and Dave fame), convinced me otherwise 20 years ago. Also, incidentally an APU product, Dave was one of the toughest competitors one could ever meet. Johnson once told me that the faith can't be used as a crutch, but you recognize who gave you your athletic ability and your gift back is what you do with it. When I once tried to explain this concept to an Olympic decathlon champion from an Eastern Bloc nation I got only blank stares.

It may be that Clay, during a meet, draws some strength from his faith. I don't know. But after 40 years of teaching at a religious college myself, one gets a sense of real faith and how it can be helpful it can be. APU coach Kevin Reid tells me that Bryan got several encouraging call from Dave Johnson while Bryan was in Beijing.

A few more observations and then I'll get off the soapbox. We can all learn from the Chinese organizers on how to run a decathlon. With the exception of some seeding, this was one well run meet. Clay has been fortunate to be both well coached and injury free this season. APU's Kevin Reid is a top-class decathlon coach (his decathletes have now won Olympic gold, silver and bronze medals). I'm unsure if anyone else can say that. Finally, if Bryan competes in the season ending DecaStar meet in France in September, he'll easily win the IAAF Combined

Events Challenge. That means for 2008 he'll have run the table: Indoor world heptathlon champ, U.S. Olympic Trials winner, world's leading decathlon score, Olympic gold medalist

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