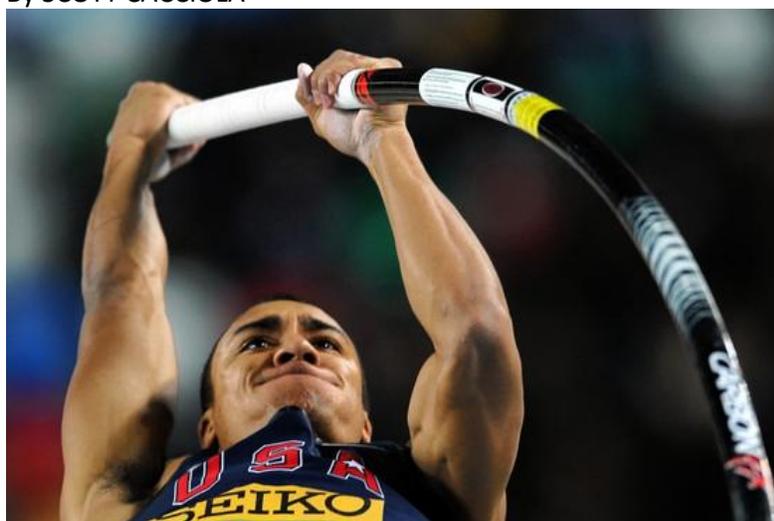


One Event the U.S. Still Owns

Decathlon's Top Three Medal Contenders Are American; the Residue of a Visa Sponsorship

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By SCOTT CACCIOLA



Agence France-Presse/Getty Images
Ashton Eaton

Ashton Eaton posted the world's highest score in the decathlon last year, making him a favorite to win Olympic gold in London this summer.

But also favored are Bryan Clay (the defending Olympic champion) and Trey Hardee (defending world champion). And here's the red-white-and-blue of it: All three are American.

Not long ago, the prospect of a U.S. medal sweep in a Summer Olympics event would have generated only modest excitement at home. After topping both the gold and total medal tables in the 1996, 2000 and 2004 Summer Games, Americans expected dominance. But four years after China displaced the U.S. atop the gold-medal table in Beijing, it's expected to wrest away the total-medal trophy in London as well. So henceforth, smaller victories may warrant larger celebrations stateside.

The decathlon would be an excellent place to start. A series of 10 events ranging from pole vault to the 110-meter hurdles, the decathlon isn't just one of the most glamorous gold medals—it's widely regarded as the best measure of who is the world's greatest athlete.

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Trey Hardee

How three Americans came to be contenders for that title offers some insight into how the U.S. might regain its footing. Not surprisingly, the answer is money: For nearly a decade, the credit-card giant Visa provided funding for the U.S. decathlon team. But in a demonstration of how far a modest amount can go, that funding ended nearly 13 years ago and never added up to a fortune. "It really was almost a rounding error in our budget," said John Bennett, a retired Visa marketing executive who has been hailed as "the Godfather" of American decathlon.

The modern decathlon dates to the Summer Games of 1912, when Native American Jim Thorpe started a decades-long supremacy in which the U.S. won gold in 10 of 14 opportunities. But this hegemony began to slip after Bruce Jenner won gold at the Montreal Games in 1976. At the next three Olympics, no American even finished among the top three.

The American public wasn't exactly paralyzed with agony, because the extended nature of the two-day event never made it a big spectator sport. But this decline bothered many in track circles, particularly Fred Samara, a former Olympic decathlete and the men's track-and-field coach at Princeton. Along with fellow decathlete coach Harry Marra, Samara began knocking on corporate doors in search of funding. "We beat the bushes," said Samara. "I mean, it was a long succession of pitches that didn't go anywhere"—until they approached Visa. As an international Olympic sponsor, Visa was already spending \$40 million on the Games. But Bennett, its marketing honcho, was intrigued. "I said, 'Well, what do you need?'" Bennett recalled.

They created the USA-Visa Decathlon team, granting membership to the top-10 finishers at the annual national championships. Each athlete would receive a monthly stipend ranging from roughly \$300 to \$900, and the entire team would convene twice a year for national training camps, where they would receive top level-coaching. The entire program would cost just \$200,000 per year.

Launched in 1990, the team recorded progress in 1992, when Dave Johnson secured America's first decathlon medal in 16 years by taking a bronze. Four years later, Dan O'Brien broke a 20-year gold drought by finishing first at the Atlanta Games. America hasn't gone without a decathlon medal since.

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The 2008 Olympic decathlon gold medalist Bryan Clay.

The Visa program ended in 2000, not long after Bennett retired. But its influence remains evident. Clay, the defending Olympic champion, attended Visa's developmental programs as a youngster. At 32, Clay is hoping to become the first decathlete to win medals at three Olympic Games. "I would love to own that piece of history," he said.

Eaton is coached by Marra, the cofounder of the Visa team. A three-time NCAA champion at the University of Oregon, Eaton is hoping at age 24 to win a spot at his first Olympics. And Hardee, who has posted two of the top three scores in the world since the Beijing Games, is coached by Mario Sategna, who competed as a member of the Visa team. Hardee, 28, was holding down fourth place in Beijing until he bonked the pole vault.

At the University of Arkansas, meanwhile, is a young hotshot named Gunnar Nixon—a freshman who holds the national high-school decathlon record. His coach studied under Kip Janvrin, who once starred on the Visa team. Marra said he considers Nixon to be a "third generation" product of the Visa program. "It's heartwarming to see what we started still going forward," said Marra.

Yet Marra, Samara and other coaches expressed concern about the future: Without a program like Visa, which subsidized training and kept decathletes in the sport, the U.S. runs the risk of a talent drain. "I think there have been some up-and-coming guys who have thrown in the towel and given up," said Sategna, Hardee's coach. "Maybe if they'd had the funding for a couple more years, who knows?"

Visa has continued to be a major sponsor of both the U.S. Olympic Committee and USA Track & Field, but a Visa spokeswoman said it's largely up to those organizations to allocate the money how they see fit. Visa also sponsors 60 individual athletes, including Clay.

For now, the depth of talent on the American team means that the U.S. track and field trials in June may serve essentially as an Olympic-level competition. Jake Arnold, for instance, is a two-time NCAA champion who as recently as 2010 was ranked seventh in the world by Track & Field News. (It's worth noting that Arnold is coached by former Visa team member Sheldon Blockburger.) In almost any other country, Arnold would easily earn a spot on the Olympic team. But at the trials he faces the prospect of competing against Eaton, Hardee and Clay. At stake is not only an Olympic berth but the financial means to keep competing.

"It's daunting," said Jeremy Snyder, Arnold's agent. "If you don't make the Olympics, then all of a sudden your shoe and apparel sponsor says, 'Hey, we can't justify having another four years with you.'"