

OLYMPIC PREVIEW: SWIMMING

It's Phelps, Lochte and everybody else

In what's shaping up to be the Games' greatest rivalry, two US swimmers will duke it out for the title of world's best.

By ASSOCIATED PRESS

There's nothing like a good rivalry to get the competitive juices flowing. At the Olympic pool in London, get ready to savor Michael Phelps vs Ryan Lochte. They are the world's two greatest swimmers, and their head-to-head races at the US Olympic trials were downright epic. Of course, that was merely a tantalizing warmup for the events that really matter in Britain. "I always love competition," Phelps said. "You can probably count on there being some other close races in the next couple of weeks."

Already the winningest Olympian ever with 14 gold medals, Phelps will swim seven more events in London in what he insists will be his final meet as a competitive swimmer. The 27-year-old has long stated his plans to retire as soon as his hands hit the wall for the final time at this Games.

Lochte has no plans to quit the sport, and the only parting gift he'd like to send to his friendly rival is a couple of Olympic silver medals, which is actually a color Phelps doesn't have.

"It's hard to say who is the best swimmer," said Lochte, who beat Phelps twice at the 2011 world championships but lost to him three out of four times at the US trials. "We're both great racers, and we have been going back and forth for so long."

While much of the attention on the men's side will focus on Phelps and Lochte, there's another American ready to break out for the women. Well, to be more accurate, for the females.

Missy Franklin is still just a girl, only 17 and looking forward to her senior year of high school in Colorado. But "Missy the Missile" won five medals at last year's worlds and is scheduled to swim a staggering seven events at the Olympics.

With her boundless enthusiasm — just about everything she says includes the word "awesome" — and a frame that's custom-built for swimming fast, Franklin has a chance to be a huge star in London.

"It sounds absolutely amazing," she said. "I'm thrilled to see what's going to happen this summer."

There are other compelling stories, as well, from Japanese star Kosuke Kitajima trying to sweep the men's Olympic breaststroke events for the third straight time to sprint stars James Magnussen of Australia (like Franklin, also known as "The Missile") and the tongue-twisting Ranomi Kromowidjojo of the Netherlands (who playfully tells anyone who asks how her name is pronounced, "Just like you write it!").

But two swimmers figure to stand above all others at this Games.

Phelps and Lochte.

"Neither one of us likes to lose," Phelps said.

Phelps actually qualified in eight Olympic events, giving him a chance

to match his record haul of gold medals from the Beijing Games four years ago. But he dropped the 200-meter freestyle, believing a slightly smaller program would give him a better chance to succeed, considering he didn't train nearly as hard for these Olympics as he did leading up to

2008.

Plus, racing seven times instead of eight removes any pressure to repeat his Great Haul of China, when he broke Mark Spitz's iconic record for the most golds at one Olympics.

"We won't hear that number 'eight' again," said Bob Bowman, Phelps' longtime coach.

That leaves him with two races against Lochte: the 200 and 400 individual medleys. The laid-back Floridian, known for his wild wardrobe and gaudy jewelry, won both events at the 2011 worlds, beating Phelps with a world-record time in the 200 and easily taking the longer race with Phelps sitting out.

Phelps, the two-time defending Olympic champion in both, returned to the 400 IM only this year after vowing in Beijing to never swim the grueling race again. Lochte beat him by a fairly comfortable margin at the trials, but Phelps came back to win the 200 IM — the two swimmers never more than inches apart, swimming virtually in sync for all four laps.

Look for more of the same in London, especially since Phelps has clearly been paying attention to Lochte's repeated declarations that "this is my time."

"I'm always a fan of quotes," Phelps said with a sly grin.

He also edged Lochte in the 200 free at the trials, then surprised everyone by dropping that event. That will make things a bit easier for the defending world champion, but Lochte is hardly a shoo-in against a loaded international field.

France's Yannick Agnel has put up the three fastest times in the world this year, Germany's Paul Biedermann won the 2009 world championship, and there's a trio of Asian stalwarts who figure to be in the mix: Sun Yang of China, Park Tae-hwan of South Korea and Takeshi Matsuda of Japan.

Like Phelps and Franklin, Lochte is down to swim four individual events in London. He also qualified in the 200 backstroke, another race he won

at the worlds during a six-medal performance.

The most exciting races could come in the relays, especially the 4x100 free. Australia, led by Magnussen and James Roberts, appears to be the clear favorite. But the US upset a powerful French team in 2008, a memorable race in which Jason Lezak chased down Alain Bernard on the final leg to keep Phelps on course for his eight gold medals.

"We're not farther away from the Australians now than we were from the French four years ago," said Gregg Troy, the US men's coach.

It will be interesting to see who the Americans send out on that relay. Phelps didn't even compete in the 100 free at the trials, but he's assured of being in the four-man group that swims the final. The US also could insert Lochte, though he only swam through the semifinals of the 100 free in Omaha.

At the moment, Lochte is assured of just one relay in London, the 4x200 free. He definitely wants to be on another, and his personal coach is Troy, who will have the final say on who to send out for the relays. That should provide some intrigue at selection time.

Even if the times don't match up to the Australians, the Americans might look to gain a psychological edge by having a team that includes the world's best all-around swimmers.

"You have to have those types of guys on the relays," said Cullen Jones, another contender for a relay spot. "If anything, just to scare the crap out of everyone else. Those guys really do put forth a lot of effort, especially in the 100. Even though it's not their best event, they always show up."

Magnussen is looking to live up to his nickname.

The Missile has already gone more than a half-second faster (47.10) than anyone else in the world this year in the 100 free, and he's eager to take down the world record set by Brazil's Cesar Cielo (46.91) in a high-tech bodysuit.

"If I swam it in a minute, I wouldn't mind as long as I get that Olympic gold," Magnussen said. But he added, barely pausing, "I'll be doing everything in my power to break that world record because I want to be considered the fastest man in history."

Cielo might have something to say about that, at least in the 50 free. He's the defending Olympic champion in the chaotic one-lap sprint, and he put

OLYMPIC SWIMMING

July to August: 28, 29, 30, 31, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, Finals

Michael Phelps of the US won eight gold medals at the 2008 Beijing Olympics, setting a new record for most golds in a single Olympic Games. In the 2004 Athens Olympics, he won six gold

EVENTS

Freestyle The front crawl is considered the best stroke for sprinting and is generally used in this event
Distances: 50m, 100m, 200m, 400m, 800m (W), 1,500m (M)

Backstroke Competitors swim on their backs using alternating movement of arms and legs. **Distances:** 100m, 200m

Butterfly Simultaneous use of legs and arms to propel the swimmer forward in a dolphin-like movement. **Distances:** 100m, 200m

Breaststroke Requires perfect coordination as swimmers must move arms and legs simultaneously. **Distances:** 100m, 200m

OTHER EVENTS

Individual Medley: 200m & 400m
Relays: 4x100m & 4x200m freestyle, 4x100m medley, **10km marathon***

50-METER POOL

The spearhead principle Swimmer with the fastest entry time is assigned the lane right of center. Other swimmers are placed alternately left and right in descending order of speed. The swimmers should then fan out into a spearhead

Turning judge Ensures turns and relay take-overs are legal

Backstroke turning rope Placed 5m from the end, helps backstrokers gauge distance to wall

Touch pads Register time when touched by swimmer

Back-up video Cameras film the finish at 100 frames per second for accurate judging

Stroke judges Observes legality of swimmer's strokes

False start rope Drops into pool to alert swimmers of false start

False starts One false start is permitted, any subsequent false start disqualifies the swimmer responsible

Lane timekeepers Record the time for the competitor in their designated lane

Starter Ensures each competitor is in correct lane and judges whether the start is valid

Source: London 2012 London 2012 logo and pictograms™ © LOCOG *To be held at Hyde Park CHINA DAILY / REUTERS



Michael Phelps swims to victory in the men's 100m butterfly final at the US Olympic swimming trials on July 1. Phelps won't try to replicate the eight gold medals he won in Beijing, deciding to compete in seven events this time.

MARK HUMPHREY / ASSOCIATED PRESS