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RUPP UPSET, HUDDLE DEFENDS AT USA CHAMPIONSHIPS 10,000M
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SACRAMENTO, Calif. (22-Jun) -- Galen Rupp's streak of eight consecutive USA 10,000m titles came to an end here tonight at Hornet Stadium when the two-time Olympic medalist faded in the final lap of choppy and slow race which was won by Oregon Track Club Elite's Hassan Mead in 29:01.44. Rupp, who runs for the Nike Oregon Project, finished fifth. On the women's side, Saucony's Molly Huddle extended her winning streak at these championships to three, comfortably winning the 25-lap race in a solid 31:19.86, the second-fastest by an American this year.

MEN'S RACE BECAME CAT AND MOUSE AFFAIR

While the women's contest was a traditional battle of endurance won off of a steady and strong pace, the men's race early on became a game of cat and mouse. Feeling no pressure to run a fast time, the men's pack jogged through the first 800 meters in 2:29, only slightly faster than the women (2:32). The group of 24 athletes was tightly bunched, with veteran Ben Bruce of Hoka Northern Arizona Elite at the front.

With 19 laps to go, 2015 national road running champion Sam Chelanga became impatient. Coming down the homestretch, he shot to the lead and threw in a 64.7-second lap, followed by another at 65.1. Rupp covered the move, making sure that Chelanga stayed within reach, and it looked like the race was simply getting more serious.

"We were just jogging," Chelanga told the media after the race. "I figured, these people (the fans) didn't come to just watch us jog... (so) I took it out."

But then lap after lap, Chelanga allowed the field to catch up, then he sprinted away again down the homestretch, each time opening up a

three to four-second gap on the field. The 32 year-old Nike-sponsored athlete looked like he was doing a fartlek workout.

Behind Chelanga, Rupp was running with the race's other favorites: Mead, Nike Bowerman Track Club's Chris Derrick, U.S. Army's Shadrack Kipchirchir and Leonard Korir, American Distance Project's Biya Simbassa, and Asics's Diego Estrada. Mead knew how strong Chelanga was, but he wasn't going to let his tactics sway him.

"Sam's strong; you've got to respect Sam," Mead told the media. "Just being in this sport and this event, it's hard for him to do that solo."

Each time the group passed the finish line, the yo-yoing Chelanga was still in the lead until there were three laps to go. Then Rupp surged to the front, dropping Chelanga (who would later finish seventh). Derrick made a strong move on the backstretch which turned into a 62-second penultimate lap. Rupp was at the back of the group and would never recover his position.

Mead --who dropped out in this discipline with less than 400 meters to go at last year's Olympic Trials-- felt confident with his speed. His legs were still fresh and he could smell victory.

"For me, the slower they went the better," Mead admitted. "If you ask me personally, I think I have great confidence in myself that I had the best kick in the group. So, if you want 33 minutes and it came down to the last K, I was ready to run 2:22."

Mead ripped the last lap in 55.3 seconds, and that was just enough to beat Kipchirchir, who clocked 29:01.68. Korir, who made last year's Olympic team in the same discipline, finished third in 29:02.64, and Simbassa was fourth (29:03.48). Derrick, who has battled injuries the last two seasons, finished eighth.

"It was a strange race," Derrick told reporters.

A visibly upset Rupp did not speak with the media, despite pleas from USA Track & Field officials to stop in the mixed zone.

HUDDLE RIDES EXPRESS TRAIN TO VICTORY

By comparison, Huddle's race seemed almost scripted. Running in her first USA Championships 10,000m since 2015, Olympic silver medalist and Nike Bowerman Track Club athlete Shalane Flanagan went immediately to the front and set an honest pace. After a 78.7-second opening circuit, the 2:21 marathoner got right down to business with a 73.7-second second lap, immediately stringing out the field. Flanagan thought this was her best strategy.

"I don't have a kick," explained Flanagan who is short on training after suffering a fracture in her spine earlier this year. She continued: "I just looked strategically on paper, if I can go run 31:15 to 31:30 I had a chance."

Huddle tucked in right behind Flanagan, and Huddle's training partner, Team New Balance's Emily Sisson, also fell into line along with Flanagan's Bowerman teammate Emily Infeld. Behind the leading quartet, two more Team New Balance athletes, Natosha Rogers and Kim Conley, followed.

Lap after lap, Flanagan led, the athletes frozen in their places. For 20 laps, the 35 year-old was on the front, only sharing the lead with Huddle for four of those laps. The pace had slowed to 76's and 77's, but Huddle remained patient, confident that she could break away when the time was right.

"That's what we were hoping for," Huddle said of the steady pace.

"The goal, obviously, for me and Emily to both make the team. She's really strong, so we wanted it to be strung out. Shalane and Emily Infeld wanted the same thing."

Huddle chose the penultimate lap to break away, running 69.6 seconds. She put the race away with a 65-flat final lap, thus booking her team spot for her sixth consecutive global championships.

"It was a rough last lap, but I just wanted to pour it all out," Huddle said. "Whatever it was, it was good hard practice for Worlds."

When the pace picked up on the final circuit, Flanagan was not able to jump to the next gear. That left the two Emily's to battle for the second spot, with Infeld having the edge over Sisson, 31:22.67 to 31:25.64. Flanagan, who later said she had "big aspirations for the fall," took fourth in 31:31.12.

"I haven't been on the track in a while, and they just have those gears," Flanagan said of her rivals tonight. She added: "I was massively under-prepared, but was hoping that all of my strength from the 12 to 13 years would come into play, just being tough, just being gritty out there."

COBURN LEADS STEEPLE QUALIFYING

Five-time national women's steeplechase champion Emma Coburn was the fastest tonight of 14 women who made Saturday's final, clocking a comfortable 9:38.68 in the first heat. Her 2016 Olympic teammates, Colleen Quigley (9:40.63) and Courtney Frerichs (9:47.75) also advanced without incident.

"It was good," said Coburn who runs for Team New Balance. "I was happy to not lead and just chill behind Megan (Rolland) for a while. Then with about 800 (to go), I just wanted open my legs just a little bit so Saturday's race wouldn't feel quite as shocking. It was a good race."

Stephanie Garcia, who has a 9:19.48 personal best, looked shaky in her prelim, stutter-stepping before several barriers and even falling on the second to last water jump. She recovered to finish fourth in the second heat in 9:48.70, and advanced to the final.

"Coming back after last year's Olympic Trials really made me feel vulnerable," said Garcia, who struggled the last 200 meters, fell over the final barrier and finished fifth. "You know, to put it out there then to have that ending. So, I'm proud of myself for coming back. I'm the fittest I've ever been."

MOST FAVORITES ADVANCE OUT OF 1500M FIRST ROUND

There were few surprises in the first round of the men's and women's 1500m, with Olympic medalists Matthew Centrowitz, Clayton Murphy and Jenny Simpson all advancing with little drama.

Centrowitz and Murphy (who is doubling here in the 800 and 1500-meters), had the advantage of running in the third of three heats.

Centrowitz, who runs for the Nike Oregon Project, made sure the pace was fast enough and didn't mind finishing third in 3:40.79 behind

Oregon's Samuel Praker (3:40.76) and Asics's Johnny Gregorek (3:40.78). Murphy got fourth and advanced on time (3:40.94).

"I'm glad our heat went faster than the other ones, not so much because we got the auto qualifiers but more so (because) I put a hard effort in," Centrowitz told reporters. "We have a day of rest, so not too worried about getting in a good hard effort in today; plenty of time to recover and get ready for the final."

Also advancing on the men's side was rising star Cristian Soratos. Coming off of a strong indoor season, the adidas athlete won the second heat over Olympian Robby Andrews, 3:42.01 to 3:42.25, with a confident kick.

"I had a couple of shaky races leading into this, but I knew it had nothing to do with my fitness," said Soratos. "I knew if I executed properly today I could run well and get through."

Simpson, a Team New Balance athlete, chose to lead her heat from gun to tape, a practical choice to avoid trouble, but also a decision to help the five collegiate athletes who were in her heat.

"I knew I was in a race with Sara Vaughn, who I know, and a lot of collegians," Simpson told reporters. "And I thought, they'd probably like it if I took it, so I'll just do it. It seemed like the easiest thing to do on a night like tonight."

Other favorites headed to Saturday's final were Nike's Kate Grace and Alexa Efraimson, who finished one-two in the first heat; Oregon outgoing freshman Katie Rainsberger; and American record holder Shannon Rowbury of the Nike Oregon Project.

SYMMONDS SAYS FAREWELL

Six-time national 800m champion Nick Symmonds made his swan song on the track, finishing last in his heat in 1:51.52. The affable Symmonds, who runs for Brooks, then made a startling announcement.

"It was all about saying goodbye to everybody; I gave everyone a hug I could find today," Symmonds said. He added: "I've got one more race in my legs. I'm here to let you guys know that the last race I'll

run as a pro is the 2017 Honolulu Marathon, December 10th."

At the front, Nike's Erik Sowinski led all qualifiers to the semi-finals with a mark of 1:46.55. Other key athletes to move on were Nike's Clayton Murphy and Donovan Brazier, Penn State's Isaiah Harris, and Brooks's Shaquille Walker. Casimir Loxsom, the world record-holder for 600m indoors, was the main casualty on the men's side, fading badly to finish fifth in his heat.

On the women's side Brenda Martinez of Team New Balance led all qualifiers with a 2:02.31 mark out of the first heat.

"I just wanted to be careful and stay out of the way," Martinez said. She continued: "I felt really comfortable. I think if I needed an extra gear I had it there."

Other athletes with national team aspirations to move ahead included NCAA Champion Raevyn Rogers of the University of Oregon and 2014 national champion Ajee' Wilson of adidas. High school sensation Samantha Watson also advanced.

"It was crazy; I didn't think I would be up there like that," said Watson, her eyes full of wonder. She added: "Making the finals would be cool, but I know I'm young and I know it might not happen."

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