

Sweep of 400 hurdles rallies US Olympic track team

By **EDDIE PELLIS**, AP National Writer

1 hour, 7 minutes ago

BEIJING (AP)—The big debate was whether it would be the best U.S. Olympic track team in 40 years. Maybe ever. Once the torch was lit, though, it started shaping up as one of the biggest disappointments.

A couple of underdogs got things back on track for the Americans on Monday.

Angelo Taylor led a medals sweep in the 400-meter hurdles and Stephanie Brown Trafton won a surprising gold in the discus. A team that came into the day with no gold medals walked out with two. A team that came in trailing Belarus in the medals count walked out in the lead.

“We wanted to uplift the track team,” Taylor said, “and bring home the sweep.”

Who better to lead than a comeback kid?

The Olympic champion in Sydney in 2000, Taylor was laying electrical wire 14 months ago, virtually out of the sport in the aftermath of an ugly legal imbroglio. He failed to make the final in Athens four years ago—he said he had stress fractures in both shins. In Beijing, he became the first 400-meter hurdler since Edwin Moses to win gold medals eight years apart.

He ran a personal-best time of 47.25 seconds, ahead of teammates Kerron Clement and Bershawn Jackson, who combined to produce the first sweep of the event since the U.S. did it in 1960.

“To go through what I went through and be back on top again—I’m just so blessed right now,” Taylor said.

It will take more performances like these to advance the conversation about this team being as good as the 1968 Mexico City squad, which won 28 medals— fewer events were contested then—and included Bob Beamon, Dick Fosbury, John Carlos and Tommie Smith.

“No way,” Carlos said at the Olympic trials. “They had guys in ‘68 that didn’t make the team that could whip this team. I’m not taking anything away from these young athletes, but I don’t think they have anywhere near the depth we had.”

Slowly, though, the Americans are showing some depth.

There was the sweep.

There was Jenn Stuczynski’s pole vault silver, trailing only Russia’s Yelena Isinbayeva, who set a new world record. That Cold War-style rivalry got heated after the American

Related Video



[What happened to Tyson?](#)

[More 2008 Olympics Videos](#)

said she hoped to “kick some Russian butt.”

There was Brown Trafton, who was considered a field filler more than a medal contender. She threw the discus 212 feet, 5 inches (64.74 meters) on her very first attempt—and that held up to give the U.S. team its first gold.

She didn’t make it out of Olympic qualifying four years ago, had only two throws over 200 feet before this year, and finished only third at the U.S. Olympic trials.

Not great credentials, but none of that matters now.

She won the first gold for a U.S. woman in the discus since Lillian Copeland in 1932 and only the second medal of any color since then.

And then the 28-year-old from Galt, Calif., stood higher than anyone on the medals stand. Yes, a tear or two came to eye, but mostly she just stood there smiling. “The Star-Spangled Banner” finally played.

“I came to the Bird’s Nest to lay a golden egg, and that’s what I did,” Brown Trafton said. “I am surprised we haven’t won more gold. But you know what? I hope this sets a trend.”

It did.

The hurdlers were considered sweep candidates, but the U.S. had learned over the first three days of the meet that there’s a big difference between being picked to do something and doing it.

Tyson Gay didn’t reach the 100-meter final. The U.S. women were shut out by a Jamaican sweep. Reese Hoffa finished seventh in the shot put. Bernard Lagat didn’t make it out of semifinals in the 1,500.



The 1-2-3 in the hurdles wasn’t as shocking as Taylor leading the way.

Starting in Lane 6, he made up the lag quickly and was racing in front from about the 150-meter mark on. Clement, the 2007 world champion, and Jackson closed the gap down the stretch, but this was a pretty easy victory for Taylor.

His gold at the Sydney Olympics was the high point in a career that got derailed, first with injuries, then when he was put on probation in a case that started when he was arrested after a police officer said he found Taylor naked in a car with a 15-year-old girl.

“I just had to stay strong,” Taylor said. “I had a lot of people in my corner encouraging me and looking after me.”

His sponsorship pulled, he took a job laying electrical cable in Atlanta— one that got him off work early enough so he could train in the afternoons.

The injuries started to heal and suddenly Taylor found himself in Olympic form. He finished third at the trials and peaked at



exactly the right time.

There no such fortune for host China, which lost defending champion 110-meter hurdler Liu Xiang, one of the country's biggest Olympic stars, to a foot injury.

He lined up for his first qualifying heat, took a few strides out of the blocks, heard a gun that signaled a false start by another runner and then tore his numbers off and limped dejectedly to the tunnel, grimacing and clutching his leg. His hamstring had been a problem, but the tendon in his right foot flared up a couple of days ago, leaving him unable to go.

At least for the morning, the Liu news sent everything else at this meet to the back page—maybe a good thing for an American team off to an unexpectedly poor start.

Gay, Hoffa and Lagat were the biggest names, and just before Liu scratched, two-time Olympic silver medalist Terrence Trammell strained his left hamstring and cleared only one hurdle before pulling up in the opening heat.

Deena Kastor, the American record-holder, pulled out of the marathon with a broken foot, and U.S. women finished 4-5-8 in the 100 and lost their protest that there was a false start—by one of them, no less.

In fact, this was turning into a very Jamaican celebration. Usain Bolt set the world record in the 100, their women swept the event and Bolt kept cruising Monday, coasting through the quarterfinals of the 200, looking for the first sprint double in Wednesday's final since Carl Lewis in 1984.