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The Africans Are Hearing Footsteps

Kara Goucher Leads a U.S. Marathon Revival; Her Style -- Run More, Think Less

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By DAVID BIDERMAN

Sunday in Berlin, Kara Goucher, America's greatest hope in the marathon, will try to claim the top podium spot at the world track and field championships—something no American-born runner has ever done.

If she pulls it off, the 31-year-old will become the standard bearer for a new approach to training distance runners.

In a bold move aimed at catching the Africans who have owned this event, Ms. Goucher has taken all the tactics generated by U.S. running experts in the last 20 years—the charts, the mileage recommendations and high-tech motion-sensing computer readouts—and stuffed them in a dumpster.



Getty Images

Kara Goucher's free-wheeling training style has helped her become a leading contender in the marathon.

Olympics. This time span was the most prosperous international running period for the U.S. since 1908.

On the sport's elite levels, new theories about strategy and training took hold. The Runner's Handbook, first written in 1978 by Bob Glover and Jack Shepherd, told would-be marathoners to focus on highly structured training, while articles in Runner's World told them how many miles to run on how many days and how quickly to do it.

Trouble was, U.S. runners didn't improve—they started sucking wind. Ms. Benoit Samuelson's Olympic gold medal in 1984 was the last for an American over the next two decades.

Some experts blamed the decline on a lack of competitive fire. Others believed Americans were too afraid of failure or too busy partying through the roaring 1980s to make the necessary sacrifices in training.

Meanwhile, African runners began winning everything in sight. Since 1983, runners from places like Kenya and Ethiopia have won 28 marathon medals in 18 major international events, while Americans have won four. Some went as far as to suggest the Africans weren't just more motivated—they might be genetically superior. A recent study by Swedish and South African

"I want to be one of the best runners in the world," she says, "and winning an event like this means that's what you are."

The glory years of U.S. distance running started in 1969 with the arrival of Steve Prefontaine, the charismatic runner from the University of Oregon who won seven NCAA championships between 1970 and 1973 and was known for his all-out style and fearlessness on the track. "Pre" as he was known, would jump out to early leads, race as hard as possible and wear out opponents. Before he died in a car accident at 24, he set U.S. records in every event between 2,000 and 10,000 meters.

Though he never trained for marathons, Mr. Prefontaine ignited interest in distance running. Frank Shorter, one of America's greatest marathoners, took Olympic gold in 1972 and silver in 1976. Later that decade Alberto Salazar earned a 1978 NCAA championship and won three consecutive New York City marathons from 1980 to 1982. Joan Benoit Samuelson won gold in the 1984

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Tom Ratcliffe, an agent for several Kenyan runners, says Africans "enjoy the battle" in endurance running while most Westerners "race with anxiety." He says his runners usually have no idea how many miles they run per week, or how fast. They just want to win.

Felix Limo, a Kenyan runner who has won the 2006 London and 2005 Chicago marathons, says U.S. runners rely too much on structure and scientific programs—the sorts of things described in those books in the 1970s. They fix their minds on certain speeds, he says, and aren't flexible enough.

"I don't need a mileage like the runners here," he says. "I can push myself."

One of the first Western runners to figure out the Africans was Great Britain's Paula Radcliffe, who has won eight major marathon events since 2000. She's got some structure to her training, but she's known more for her relentless attacking and competitiveness.

Ms. Radcliffe's emergence coincided with the 2001 founding of the Mammoth Track Club in Mammoth Lakes, Calif., whose mission is to advance the naturally aggressive "run first, ask questions later" style the Africans run with.

Deena Kastor, one of the club's most successful runners, finally broke through in 2006 to earn a No. 1 ranking. She won a bronze medal in the women's marathon in Athens in 2004. Another Mammoth runner, Ryan Hall, is the best American male in the event. He finished third in Boston in 2009—the only non-African runner in the top 10. "For so long, people here were focused on figuring out the exact science behind setting records," Ms. Kastor says. "But there is no exact science."

Though she never trained with the Mammoth club, Ms. Goucher is the latest and potentially greatest disciple of this new approach. At the University of Colorado she was the NCAA champion in the 3,000 and 5,000 meters. In 2007, she finished third in the 10,000 meters at the world championships. One year later, her coach, Mr. Salazar, talked her into running her first marathon. She set the track scene ablaze with third-place finishes in her first two races—2008 in New York and 2009 in Boston.

During marathon training, Ms. Goucher runs twice a day, but says she hardly ever considers specific times and distances. She focuses on running hard and fast for as long as it seems right. "We think she has the chance to do something big," Mr. Salazar says.

This April at the Boston Marathon, Ms. Goucher says she learned a valuable lesson. While leading the race in the closing miles, she says she got caught up in strategy. Rather than simply running naturally hard, she sped up to try to end the race. "I was having doubts," she says. Both Salina Kosgei, a Kenyan, and Dire Tune, an Ethiopian, caught and passed her. It's a mistake she vows not to make again.

"It's not that Americans can't win," Ms. Goucher says, "it's just sometimes we get obsessed with time. You can't win a race like that."

Write to David Biderman at David.Biderman@wsj.com

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