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outdoor extremes — endurance

Meyer: Ritzenhein backbone to U.S. revival

By John Meyer
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Dathan Ritzenhein's success in 5,000 and 10,000 meters is causing some conflict with his marathon obligations.

Fans of American distance running had to wait 13 years for an American-born runner to join Bob Kennedy on the list of 5,000-meter runners to break 13 minutes. But when former Colorado Buff Dathan Ritzenhein broke Kennedy's American record Aug. 28, they only had to wait another seven days for Matt Tegenkamp to join the sub-13 club.

For those of us who love distance running, these are exciting times.

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There were some lean years following Kennedy's heyday, and Americans are still behind the East Africans who dominate the sport, but there have been several encouraging achievements.

They include medals in the Athens Olympic marathons for Deena Kastor and Meb Keflezighi, who emigrated from Eritrea to the U.S. at an early age; a bronze medal for Kara Goucher in the 10,000 meters at the 2007 world championships and a bronze for Shalane Flanagan in that event at the Beijing Olympics; and third-place finishes for Goucher and Ryan Hall at this year's Boston Marathon.

Ritzenhein lowered the American 5,000 record to 12:56.27, and Tegenkamp has gone 12:58.56.

Ritzenhein's achievement was surprising because he has focused on the marathon in recent years. This year he decided to take a break from that distance and focused on the track, running the 10,000 at the world championships in Berlin and finishing sixth — a best-ever finish for an American in that distance at the biennial worlds.

For Ritzenhein to finish ninth in the marathon at the Beijing Olympics and set the American record in the 5,000 a year later demonstrates his remarkable range as a runner. It also presents him with some tough decisions looking forward to the 2012 London Olympics.

"I never thought I would all of a sudden run 12:56 this quick, so it's kind of thrown us all for a loop a little bit," Ritzenhein said. "We're going to

try to realize what the best potential is at each event. We'll just have to find out how things develop.

"You have to be able to do what you enjoy too, and I really have this passion for the marathon."

Ritzenhein ran a marathon PR at London this year (2 hours, 10 minutes) but it was good enough only for 10th place. Disappointed and believing he needed a change, he left coach Brad Hudson in favor of former marathon great Alberto Salazar.

Salazar coaches a small group of runners based in Portland, Ore., that includes Goucher and her husband, Adam Goucher. Both Gouchers won individual NCAA cross country titles at CU, as did Ritzenhein. Also in the Salazar group is University of Oregon phenom Galen Rupp.

Ritzenhein credits Hudson, CU coach Mark Wetmore, even the coaching he received as a boy for the success he is having now.

"I was really blessed in high school to have a very devoted coach as well," the Michigan native said. "It started for me all the way back then. A lot of attention could be paid to the last four years or five years I had with Brad, developing my aerobic capacity, but to tell you the truth that's something that's happened for me ever since I was very young — 15, 16.

"Even before that — I started working out with my dad, doing triathlons. We would swim, we would bike, we would run. Ever since I was 12

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years old, really, I've been doing massive amounts of aerobic type training."

At CU he ran "a lot of volume" in accordance with Wetmore's coaching philosophy.

"But Mark really did have some hard, fast races," Ritzenhein said. "He really thought it was important to develop faster, 'overspeed' training and racing. I had that for those three years as well. . . . So when I came to Alberto, I'd had so many years' worth of training behind me. Once I focused back in on some speed, I had huge development over the last couple of months."

It's not hard to see Ritzenhein going after the Keflezighi's American record in the 10,000 (27:13.98). Ritzenhein's 27:22:28 on a hot day at the world championships in Berlin last month is No. 5 on the U.S. list.

"At this moment, I enjoy doing track, but I know as soon as the marathon season rolls around this fall, I'll be itching for it again," Ritzenhein said. "It was easy for people to talk me into doing the marathon, because it was something I really wanted to do. But I loved being competitive on the track this summer too. I'm going to go whichever direction I feel like I can be the best in."

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