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Chase is on again for Billy Nelson

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Billy Nelson got a taste of the Olympics in Beijing four years ago, and that's made him more motivated as the 2012 London Games approach. Nelson, a 2002 graduate of Taft High School, will enter the U.S. Olympic Track and Field Trials as top-rated in the 3,000-meter steeplechase.

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Age: 28

Height, weight: 5-6, 145

High school: Taft (class of 2002)

College: Colorado (graduated 2008)

Residence: Longmont, Colo.

Family (pictured): Wife Alisa, daughter Bella (4), son Noah (2)

Notable: Won the 2011 USA Outdoor championships in the steeplechase (8:23.46). In 2008, was Olympic Trials runner-up (8:21.47) and NCAA runner-up (8:28.85). In 2007, won the Big-12 Conference steeplechase (8:47.89) and was fourth at the NCAAs (8:33.33). A four-time NCAA All-American. He holds the Taft High records in the 3,200 meters (8:54) and mile (4:15).

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Taft High graduate Billy Nelson with his wife Alisa, who also is a Taft High graduate, 4-year-old daughter Bella, and son Noah, 2.



"I feel like I'm at the top of my game now," Nelson said in a telephone interview from Colorado. He is an assistant coach and recruiting coordinator for the University of Colorado track and field program.

"I'm not over-confident, but I think I have a great chance to make the team."

He'll need to place in the top three at the Trials in Eugene, Ore., to earn his second straight Olympic berth.

The qualifying round in the steeplechase is today, and the final to determine the Olympic berths Thursday. Nelson, 28, was second in the event at the 2008 U.S. Olympic Trials.

His lifetime best in the event is an 8:17.27 from a meet in Monaco in July. That time is faster than any American since May of 2011, when the Olympic qualifying began. Three weeks ago in Rome, Nelson clocked 8:21.42, the second-best mark in his career to place ninth. It was the best finish by an American.

That was a vast improvement from the 8:34.10 he ran on May 18 in the Oxy Hewlett Packard meet in Los Angeles, where he placed 12th.

"I didn't run that well in that race," Nelson said of the May 18 event. "I hadn't really planned on running in that meet. It was just a last-minute thing."

"I ran at Rome a lot better. I ran where I should be. I ran at a confident level."

Four years ago, Nelson ran 8:36.66 in Beijing to place 11th in his 14-runner heat. He did not advance to the next round.

"When it's all said and done, if I only make the Olympics once, I'll be OK with that," Nelson said. "I do make it, I have some goals."

"I didn't make the final in Beijing," Nelson said. "I'd like to make it out of the early rounds and compete with the best in the final stage."

The steeplechase is 7 1/2 laps over a typical 400-meter track that features seven water jumps and 28 jumps over a 3-foot high barricade the same height as the 400 intermediate hurdles.

The water jump is what most track fans think about when discussing the steeplechase.

"You ask most people and the water jump is the most significant part of the race," Nelson said. "Especially in a local race. People move down to the water pit."

The barricade can be a challenge because it doesn't give if a runner strikes it.

"It's a barrier. It's wide," Nelson said. "It takes up 3-4 lanes of track. It's scary going into that. It's not something you want to stumble into. It's not something you want to hit with your trail leg or foot."

Nelson said he recalls striking a barricade only once in competition.

"For the next 100 meters it felt like I was running on one leg," he said. "I hit my knee that day. It would've been a PR. But that's the way goes sometimes."

Nelson said he ran his first steeplechase while at Taft High. The event is not a traditional high school event.

"We had a home meet, the Taft Invitational, where we had it," Nelson said. "For me, it's a fun event. It's different from just running around the track. The steeple requires athleticism and I feel I'm pretty athletic."

Nelson may have the best time coming into the Trials but he said he isn't overconfident because several Americans have personal best times that are very close.

"I'm faster going into the Trials than I was in 2008," he said. "I am where I want to be. I think the field is a little tougher than '08.

"There's six guys whose PRs range from 8:17 to 8:20. It's really close. I don't think I can go into the race saying I have to do this time or have to do that time. I just have to be in the top 3."

Nelson said he thinks it's an advantage living and training in Colorado.

"The elevation here is 5,600 feet. I think that's an edge," he said. "A lot of groups come up to Boulder to train at this elevation. I think, for the big picture, training in elevation is better for distance runners."

Nelson said his lifetime best of 8:17 "puts me at 27th or 28th in the world."

He added that improving on that time is his goal and acknowledges that earning a medal will be difficult.

"Going from 8:10 to 8:15 would put you in the top 20 in the world, and I'd like to be in the top-20," Nelson said. "The fastest time in the world this year is 7:54. the world record is 7:53. A phenomenal time is anything under 8. A great time is under 8:12."

Kenya has dominated the steeplechase at the world level for decades.

Kenyans boycotted the Olympics in 1980 and 1984, but that country has won every steeplechase gold medal in the last eight Olympics it has competed in -- six straight since 1988 plus the 1968 and 1972 Games.

Kenya has won 19 of 27 possible medals since 1968 (excluding 1980 and 1984) and 14-of-18 since 1988.

The United States has won five steeplechase medals since the event made its Olympics debut in 1920. The only American to win gold was Horace Ashenfalter in 1952. Since then, the only Americans to earn medals were bronze winners George Young in 1968 and Brian Diemer in 1984.