

FIVE EVENTS TO WATCH AT RIO

By Peter Rule

In my view, all Olympic events are worth watching. However if you are limited to what you can watch, here are some unmissable events.

Times and dates given are for the finals of the events, and are AEST.

Following each athlete's name is their best this year, and if not a PB, their PB and the year it was set. For bests set indoors or at altitude, the outdoor or non-altitude best is also given.

Women's 10,000m (Sunday 13th, 12.10am)

Women's 3000m steeplechase (Tuesday 16th 12:15am)

I have lumped these together because they should each be exciting head-to-head battles.

The 10,000m features Tirunesh Dibaba (ETH, 30:28.53/29:54.66) twice Olympic Champion and 3-time World Champion, who had never lost a race over this distance until June this year. That should be enough to make her a hot favourite, but she will have to battle with Almaz Ayana (ETH, 30:07.00) who has only run one 10,000m race. But it was a good one, being 8th on the world all-time list. She is versatile - she is almost certain to win the 5000m later on, and she is a former holder of the world junior 3000m steeplechase record! One to watch to see if she can upset these two is Vivian Cheruiyot (KEN, 31:36.37A/30:30.44) who won last year's worlds.

Others to keep an eye on are Gelete Burka (ETH, 30:28.47) who won silver last year and Alice Aprot (or Nawowuna) (KEN, 30:26.94)

In the 3000m steeplechase, 19 year-old Ruth Chebet (or Jebet) (BHR, 8:59.97) was born in Kenya and was "recruited" by Bahrain in 2013. She likes to break open the field with a fast middle kilometre and then try to hang on. Finishing fast will be last year's world champion, Hyvin Jepkemoi (or Kiyeng) (KEN, 9:00.01). They had a terrific battle in the Eugene Diamond League this year, with Chebet prevailing by just .04sec. Defending Olympic Champion, Habiba Ghribi (TUN, 9:21.35/9:05.36 '15) has only run twice this year, but could be in the mix for a medal. Blond haired Emma Coburn (USA, 9:10.76) will be easy to pick in the field of Kenyans and Ethiopians. She is in good form being 3rd in the Eugene race, and looking for a medal in Rio.

Australians Madeline Hills (9:21.56) and Genevieve LaCaze (9:23.19) have improved this year and are realistic chances for top 8 finishes.

Men's 400 m (Monday 15th, 11:00am)

This was the highlight of last year's world championships and it promises to be just as good if not better this year. All of last year's finalists are back and running well, and the depth has improved with fast newcomers appearing. To make the final in Rio, athletes will possibly have to run faster than 44.50.

The three medallists from last year are the favourites. Wayde van Niekerk (RSA, 44.11A; 44.12/43.48 '15) ran to exhaustion in winning the worlds (he was taken to hospital after the event) and he may have to do the same in Rio to get the gold. He is undefeated this year and will be favourite.

Kirani James (GRN, 44.08/43.74 '15) is the defending Olympic champion and has improved since then. The problem is that others have improved more. He is also undefeated this year and will be in the mix in the straight.

Consistent LaShawn Merritt (USA, 43.97/43.65 '15) (who has served a drugs ban) has the fastest time so far this year and is the 2008 Olympic champion, as well as winning 2 gold and 2 silver from the last 4 worlds. It should be quite a tussle in the last 100m of the race.

2014 world junior champion, Machel Cedenio (TTO, 44.43) is showing improvement and would surprise if he does not make the final. Isaac Makwela (BOT, 44.85/43.72 '15) has had problems this year. He has been running a very fast 300m followed by a very slow 100m. He will need to pace himself better to be a factor. Exciting junior Babaloki Thebe (BOT, 44.21A, 44.69) had not run a 400m race in competition

until this year. He ran 44.67 in a semi of last month's world juniors, only to be disqualified for running a few steps on the lane line. Another Grenadan improving this year is Bralon Taplin (GRN, 44.38). There could be

2 from that small country in the final. Others to look out for are Steven Gardiner (BAH, 44.46/44.27 '15), Nery Brenes (CRC, 44.60), Gil Roberts (USA, 44.67/44.53 '15) and last month's world junior champion Abdelah Haroun (QAT, 44.81/44.27 '15)

Men's 100m (Monday 15th; 11:25am)

Of course, all eyes will be on Usain Bolt (JAM, 9.88/9.58WR '09) who is going for a unique triple 3-peat of gold medals. This is the first of his events, and the hardest for him to win. He has only run sparingly this year, lately because of a hamstring twinge that caused him to miss the Jamaican Trials. He is the supreme big event runner and if injury free, will start favourite. Most will be hoping he wins.

Twice banned for drugs (that he blamed on others and refuses to take responsibility for) Justin Gatlin (USA, 9.80/9.74 '15) will be Bolt's biggest threat. At age 34 he is running better than ever (which raises further questions). He was psyched out by Bolt in last year's worlds, his only loss in the last 3 years, when his form went to pieces as Bolt caught him in the last 20m. He has a good start, and should at least lead for the first 80m.

Yohan Blake (JAM, 9.94/9.69 '12) was second in the last Olympics, but has been largely injured since then until returning seriously this year. He obviously has the talent to do well here, if his lack of recent training and races does not tell on him.

Just turned 21, Trayvon Bromell (USA, 9.84) won a bronze medal last year and has improved and gained experience since. He will be looking for a further medal in Rio.

Since he quit college (USC) at the end of last year and "turned pro" Andre De Grasse (CAN, 9.95/9.92 '15) has been quiet. Perhaps he is just seeking to peak in the Olympics, rather than stretch himself over the whole season as he did last year while in college. He will also be seeking to emulate the bronze medal he won last year (he was equal with Bromell)

Jimmy Vicaut (FRA, 9.86) has run fast times this year, but he has a touch of the Asafa Powell syndrome - he tends to underperform in finals of big meets.

Others looking to progress to the final are Nickel Ashmeade (JAM, 9.94/9.90 '13), the surprising third in the US trials, Marvin Bracy (USA, 9.94/9.93 '15), Akani Simbine (RSA, 9.89) and Jak Ali Harvey (TUR, 9.92A/10.01 '15), the former Jamaican Jaques Harvey.

Men's Pole Vault (Tuesday 16th, 9:35am)

This event is always among those events to watch!

World record holder Renaud Lavillenie (FRA, 6.03i; 5.95/6.16i '14; 6.05 '15) is the best vaulter and should win. However he has a habit of sometimes letting the occasion get to him in big competitions. If he is stressed, he does not penetrate enough before his rock-back and comes down on the bar (although with plenty of height). Watch to see if he does this in Rio. He is the only vaulter with a run-up of 20 steps.

The crew-cut Sam Kendricks (USA, 5.91) has shown great form and consistency this year and should get a medal. He will be the only vaulter using a new high-tech ESSX pole.

Last year's world champion (when Lavillenie faltered) red-headed Shawnacy Barber (CAN, 6.00i; 5.91/5.92 '15) has been very inconsistent this year, probably because he has had an amazing 18 outdoor competitions. He was born in USA and lived his whole life there. He is coached by his father, a former Canadian PV champion (who was run out of Texas while a high school coach there for misconduct with one of his students). On his good days he can challenge for a medal.

Competing in his own country should give Thiago Braz da Silva (BRA, 5.93i; 5.90/5.92 '15) a lift. He has not competed in the Diamond League this year, preferring smaller meets, no doubt hoping to peak in Rio.

The Poles have always had good vaulters (possibly because of the name of the event) but they have not yet hit the heights (so to speak) this year. Paweł Wojciechowski (5.84i; 5.71/5.91 '11) (good luck to the TV commentators with that one) won the '11 Worlds, and won bronze last year, and will need to approach that form to repeat in Rio. Piotr Lisek (5.77i; 5.70/5.90i '11; 5.82 '14) also won a bronze in last year's Worlds, but has not approached that form this year. Robert Sobera (5.77i; 8.70/5.81 '15) was a surprise winner of the Europeans last month in difficult conditions when Lavillenie no-heighted.

One of the few elite black vaulters, Raphael Holzdeppe (GER, 5.84i/5.94 '15) has been injured for most of the outdoor season so far, but has been selected. He was 3rd in the last Olympics, then 1st and 3rd at the '13 and '15 worlds, so if back to full fitness will be a contender for a medal.

Watch also for Augusto Dutra da Silva (BRA, 5.70/5.82 '13) and Jan Kudlička (CZE, 5.83). Kurtis Marschall (AUS, 5.70) disappointed in the recent World Juniors when he was beaten into 2nd place, and will do well to make the final.

Women's 800m (Sunday 21st; 10:15am)

Controversial Caster Semenya (RSA, 1:55.33) is almost certain to win this event. She is an intersex person, and when she easily won the 2009 Worlds as a 19 year-old, her manly appearance caused questions to be asked. She was suspended while tests were done, and the IAAF brought in a rule that a person with a testosterone level greater than 10 (the average for women is 3) would have to take medication to bring it down to that level to compete as a woman. She competed after that, but without any success at all. Then an Indian intersex person took the IAAF to CAS and the rule was thrown out. Semenya apparently stopped taking her medication as she has been unbeatable this year. Of course the condition is not her fault, but is it fair to the others she competes against? She has recently married her girl-friend. She relies on her powerful finish, and there is talk that if she is pressed, she could break the world record.

Clearly the next best is Francine Niyonsaba (BDI, 1:56.24) who has regularly beaten everyone except Semenya on the Diamond League circuit.

In the mix for a medal are Margaret Wambui, (KEN, 1:57.52) just 20 years old who won the World Juniors in 2014, and last year's world silver medallist, Melissa Bishop (CAN, 1:57.43) who has been running into good form recently.

I have been impressed with the form of Renelle Lamote (FRA, 1:58.01) this year but she will have to improve even more to challenge the others.

'13 Worlds winner, Eunice Sum (KEN, 1:57.47/1:56.99) has not performed as well so far this year, but cannot be written off because of her experience. Last year's surprise gold medallist Marina Arzamasova (BLR, 1:59.65/1:57.54) has not run anywhere near last year's form and will need a huge improvement to be a factor in Rio.

* maths was never my best subject

I have been prevailed upon to prepare brief comments for all in-stadium events (someone else can do the walks) to add to a form guide, and if anyone would like to have this, email me at rulelegal@inet.net.au before Friday and I will send it out.