



The road to London runs through Oregon

A peek inside the hope, happiness and heartbreak of the U.S. Track and Field 2012 Olympic Trials

By BEN MCCARTY
News staff writer

EUGENE — The venues that played host to the 2012 U.S. Olympic track and field trials are drenched in so much tradition that it practically drips from the brows of the competitors and plops in the raindrops falling on the Hayward Field grandstands. It is 10 days full of history, pomp, circumstance, flash, pizzazz, pain and glory. It's the Olympic experience brought to you by Nike.

The apparel giant's footprints are everywhere, from the hammer throw championships held at its Beaverton headquarters to the giant swoosh emblazoned on the Hayward Field scoreboard to the Nike-designed bright red track suits worn by the Olympic team members.

Those uniforms carry with them more than the pride of represented their country, but also carry with them the possibility of thousands of dollars through endorsements; not just from Nike but other Olympic sponsors as well.

The buses shuttling spectators to and from Hayward Field in Eugene are covered with images of Nike athletes, those who either have, or are expected to, attain Olympic glory.

No one wants a fourth-place finisher. It's not what you have done in previous Olympics, world championships or your college career that matters. It's what happens in that one moment, and who seizes it, that counts.

The Hayward Field video boards played videos of past track and field greats throughout the trials; those who had grabbed the moment and held on for dear life. Most of the competitors who could be seen crossing the finish line behind the greats in the historic clips didn't have their names mentioned once.

One of the most heartbreaking, and yet uplifting, examples of what the athletes had on the line came in the women's 5,000-meter race.

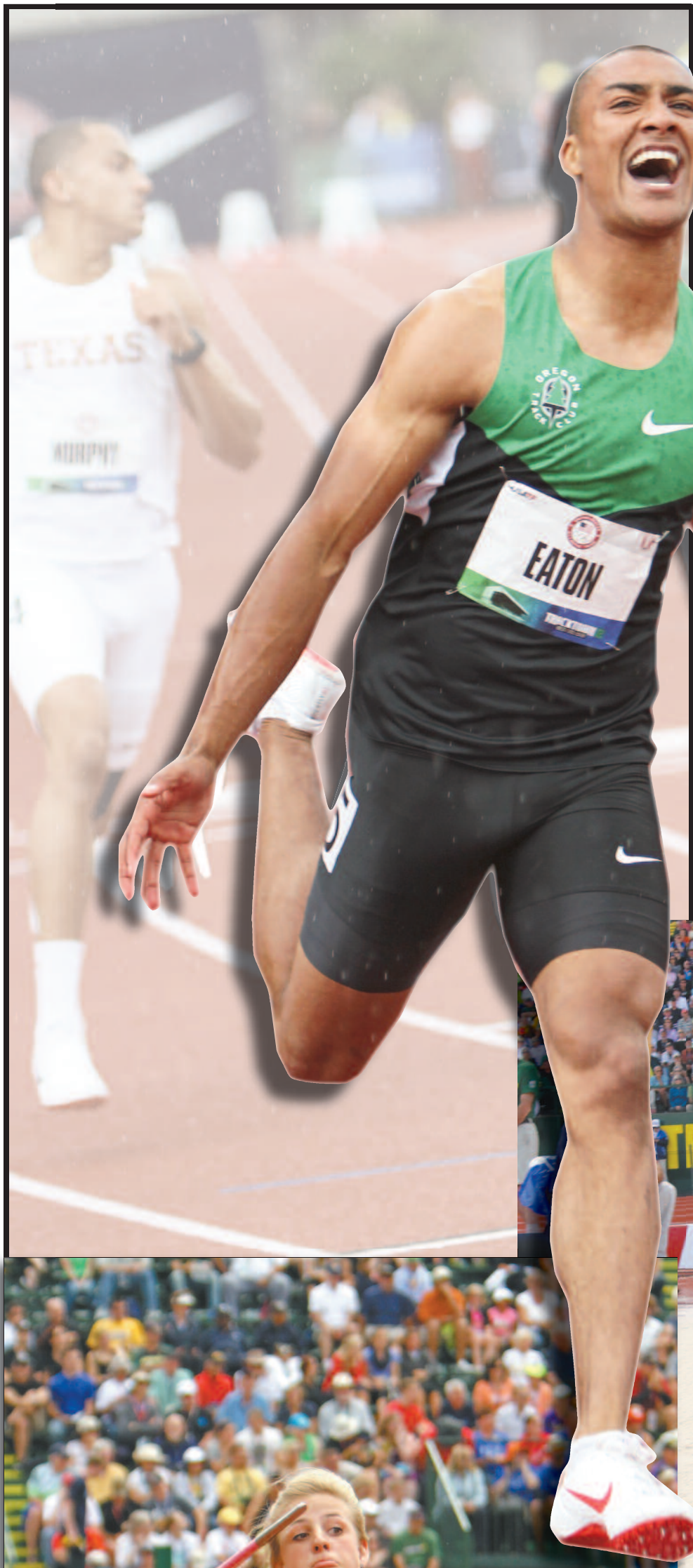
For about 4,500 meters Julia Lucas was leading the race. For 4,999.9 meters she was going to the Olympics. She came into the race as the No. 3 seed and a heavy favorite to make the Olympic team. She lived up to the billing for the bulk of the race, and then she began to slowly fade.

With 100 meters to go her left leg appeared to give out on her, and she had run on one good leg while dragging the other toward the finish line.

Behind her, what had been nearly a 50-meter gap between the front three and the rest of the pack rapidly narrowed.

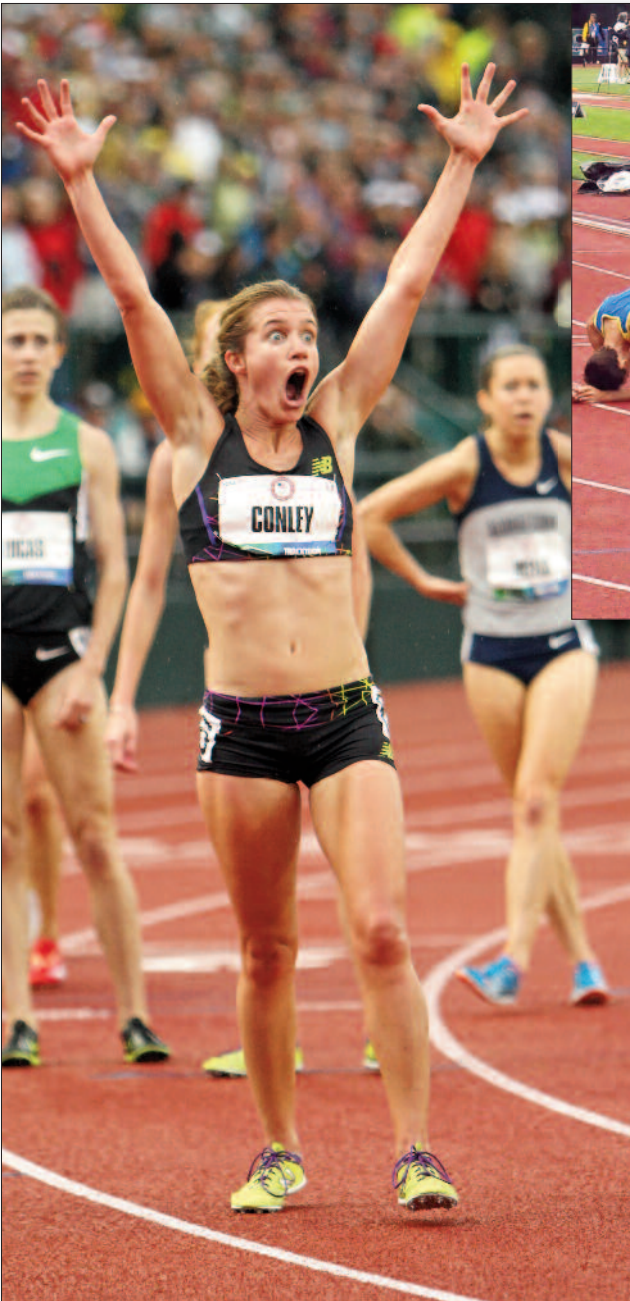
In the final feet before the finish line Kim Conley dashed through the pack, pulled even with Lucas and

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Photos by Brian Shortt

ASHTON EATON (top left) celebrates after crossing the finish line in first place in the 100-meter dash as part of the men's decathlon. Eaton went on to set a world record in the event. Michael Hartfield leaps as far as he can in front of a packed grandstand in the long jump. The Ohio State student athlete finished sixth in the competition. At left, Gresham High School student Hayley Crouser lets fly with the javelin during the semifinals. Crouser went on to finish seventh in her first Olympic Trials. Above right: From left to right Danielle Carruthers, Kim Castlin and Queen Harrison storm over the hurdles in a women's 110-meter hurdles qualifying heat. None of the three made the finals.



Photos by Brian Shortt and Ben McCarty



EVAN JAEGER and Donald Cabral (top) embrace after finishing first and second in the 3,000-meter steeplechase to earn spots to London as less-fortunate runners collapse or trudge off the track. Team USA members (above) parade around the track in their Nike uniforms after making the team. What can you do in four-hundredths of a second? If you are Kim Conley (top left) you can earn the third and final spot to London in the women's 5,000-meter run while Jennifer Lucas (bottom left) who Conley passed at the finish line, is left to explain what went wrong after finishing fourth and missing her chance to make the team.

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then lunged ahead into third place at the finish line

She snuck into third place by four-hundredths of a second, and got the necessary Olympic qualifying time by just two-hundredths of a second

She went from being an afterthought to one of the day's top stories. Through the post-race interview with NBC, the victory lap and then a press conference she could not wipe a huge smile off her face.

"Not until the last 100 meters could I see I was reeling people in and something clicked in my brain," Conley said. "I wasn't going to give up a top-three spot so I just buckled down and went for it."

Lucas, on the other hand, was left to stand in front of a gaggle of reporters, do her best to hold back tears and explain what went wrong.

"I blew it," she told the assembled throng, declaring than in light of her goal being to make the Olympic team, her entire season was a failure.

Some came to Eugene and seized the moment. Ashton Eaton blew away the decathlon world record, and heads to London as a favorite to win gold in the event as one of the faces of Nike's pre-Olympic marketing push.

Others, like Gresham High School junior Haley Crouser, showed glimpses of what may be possible a few years from now, as she stayed with top javelin throwers in the country until the end of finals.

A few had to claw their way onto the plane for London with every bit of strength they possessed.

In the discus, Lance Brooks, a converted basketball player, was leading the competition all the way through, but had not yet achieved the Olympic qualifying mark.

For many of the throw events, competitors had a qualifying window to achieve the necessary mark,

with the Trials being their last chance.

On his last throw of the competition Brooks stepped into the ring, needed a lifetime-best throw and to top any of his previous throws in the competition by 1 foot, 10 inches.

It was a tall order considering he had only improved by 1 foot between his four previous throws.

With a packed house at Hayward Field chanting behind him, he put every ounce of preparation, every early morning practice, every dream of wearing the Team USA gear behind his throw.

The crowd roared its approval as the discus thudded into the grass, and then hushed as they awaited the measurement.

Then the measurement came back: Brooks annihilated his previous throws, posting an improvement of 2-feet, four inches and surpassing the qualifying mark by 6 inches.


Brooks was going to London.

"I knew I had it in me; I just needed a little help from the crowd," said a simultaneously relieved and thrilled Brooks at his post-event press conference.

To be honest, the Olympics are largely made up of sports that the majority of the world does not care about for approximately 47 months out of every four years. Then the Olympics roll around and most of us remember that steeplechase, race walking, team handball and badminton are Olympic sports.

Once every four years, we'll gather around the television and cheer for the stories, the medal count and the world records. Then they'll be over and we'll go back to our lives occasionally reminded of their presence by cardboard cutouts in shoe stores, cereal boxes and Subway commercials.

Meanwhile athletes like Brooks and Conley will go back to training, so that in four years they'll be ready to defend their spot from the next upstart looking to seize the moment.



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Morrow Pacific Project Fact

The project represents a total capital investment of \$212 million in Oregon. It will create more than 2,100 temporary construction-related jobs and more than 1,000 ongoing operations-related jobs.

Source: ECONorthwest Economic Impact Analysis, May 2012

