

LASHAWN MERRITT HANDILY DEFEATS
OLYMPIC GOLD MEDALIST JEREMY WARINER
IN THE 400-METER DASH



ELEPHANTS ON THE TRACK

At the Trials, large questions go unanswered ESSAY BY CHUCK ADAMS • PHOTOS BY TODD COOPER

Elephants were freely roaming Hayward Field during the Olympic Trials circus, eating the grass, knocking over hurdles, drinking from the steeplechase water trap and generally making the athletes' lives a living hell. The thing was: Nobody noticed these huge, lingering beasts, which was probably a good thing. Why focus on elephants when there are so many top-notch Americans running around doing amazing things? The athletes deserved recognition for their feats, and were rightly lauded.

But every now and then a circus elephant turns on its trainer and tramples him, storming out of the tent on a rampage before the police shoot it dead. The Beijing Olympics in August could turn out to be

one of those elephants. If it did, it would be an elephant run amok in a country gone wild on massively unsustainable growth, environmental devastation and human rights violations; a country that's the manufacturer of assault rifles and athletic shoes to the world. It would embody everything that makes 2008 a banner year for rage and redemption. And the veil of the supposedly apolitical Olympics would be stripped away.

Inside and out of Hayward Field, fans spoke of clobbering Team China in Beijing. So I wonder if the 2008 Olympics will be set up as a miniature Cold War, only the prize of victory will not be in the triumph of democracy but in determining the status of the superpowers — though when it comes to deciding which side the athletes

are fighting for, even in Beijing the line will be blurred.

When LaShawn Merritt beat Jeremy Wariner in the 400-meter dash at the Trials, the elephant was Nike claiming victory over adidas (check their singlets, pictured above). Once they graduate from the collegiate level, America's best athletes no longer represent the U.S. — they represent their sponsor. Since corporations are borderless, this is true in other countries as well. If China's Liu Xiang lines up against the U.S.'s David Oliver in the men's 110-meter hurdles final, it will be a Nike vs. Nike coup d'état. Former UO student Galen Rupp skipped school to spend a year training for the Olympic Trials at Nike's Beaverton campus using state-of-the-art technology. But somehow the rules still allowed him to wear

his Oregon singlet, and could the green and yellow *not* be considered a performance-enhancing drug at these Trials?

After Tyson Gay's record-setting sprint, the elephant was suspicions of banned substances. (Olympians are now guilty until proven innocent by their excrement, and Gay has been clean as a whistle thus far.) Much has been said of the spectators' mighty roar from inside Hayward, but just as much can be said about their silence and, by extension, the media's complacency. As Americans, we are usually outspoken folk, but while attending this internationally televised event, somehow we felt obligated to exercise our right to remain silent. But there is madness in this world that cannot simply be shushed for the start of the men's 100-meter dash. If there is a Eugene legacy at the 2008 Olympic Trials, it may be: The elephant was in our room and we went hiking.

While covering the Trials for *EW*, I kept asking myself these large, loaded questions. Do I praise the victors or question their training methods? Is it OK to ask Tyson Gay whether he's noble enough to succeed at the Olympics without the aid of performance-enhancing drugs? (Is it even Gay's decision?) Since the U.S. is now dependent on China for its continued economic stability, is it hypocritical of us to want to clobber China in sporting events but still buy up massive amounts of its exports? Can we be both proud *and* critical of the U.S. with a straight face? This is the liminal space we inhabit in 2008, and it's damn difficult to deal with. So I understand the silence, for now.

Despite these unanswered questions, the Olympic Trials was a positive experience for athlete and spectator alike. It was, in essence, a celebration of the best track-and-field athletes who call the States home, a fabulous party held at the sport's Mecca. (And yes, despite their shortcomings, the corporate sponsors should get props for funding this gigantic spectacle.) In an era where nearly everything once great about the U.S. is tarnished in oil, splashed with blood and covered with hoods, cheering the nation's fastest, strongest or most talented athlete is something that still stirs the imagination, stokes our national pride and fills us with a glimmer of hope. We carry this sentiment onward to Beijing — with bated breath. **EW**

For a recap of the Olympic Trials, see blogs.eugeneweekly.com/trials



GALEN RUPP
WEARS THE UO
SINGLET



REBECCA CHRISTENSEN JUMPS
FOR HARVARD



KARA GOUCHER TRIUMPHS IN THE 5K FINAL