

Mount St. Mary's grad coaches Olympic decathlon favorite

By Paul McMullen

pmcmullen@CatholicReview.org

A graduate of Mount St. Mary's University in Emmitsburg will have a say in deciding "the world's greatest athlete."

That title is bestowed at the Summer Olympics, upon the winner of the men's decathlon, which tests proficiency in 10 track and field events. The overwhelming favorite for the London Games is Ashton Eaton, a 24-year-old from Oregon who is coached by Harry Marra, Mount Class of 1969.

Eaton improved the world record at the U.S. Trials to 9,039 points, and is a strong favorite to win the gold medal in London, where the decathlon will be contested Aug. 8-9.

His decathlon career accelerated in late 2009, when Marra was hired by the University of Oregon to coach its multi-event athletes, which included Eaton. Marra brought with him more than three decades of experience in the discipline, including the influence of his collegiate alma mater.



Harry Marra, a 1969 graduate of Mount St. Mary's University, is the coach of Ashton Eaton, the world-record holder and Olympic favorite in the decathlon. (Courtesy Geoff Thurner/University of Oregon)

A native of Cohoes, N.Y., Marra played soccer and dabbled in a number of track events for coach Jim Deegan at the Mount. In the 1970s, Emmitsburg became home to some top decathlon prospects from Europe. Deegan coached France's William Motti to a fifth-place finish at the 1984 Olympics, and over his 52-year coaching

career has produced a record nine Penn Relays champions in the test.

Marra communicated with the Catholic Review via email from Marburg, Germany, where he stopped before making his way to London.

“After I graduated, Deegs (Deegan) got all the best and the Mount began to get a rep for the decathlon,” he said.

In addition to Deegan, the Mount’s resources also included Frank Zarnowski, a former economics professor who is regarded as the world’s leading authority on decathlon history and records.

“I learned a ton from Deegs and Zeek (Zarnowski) and from doing three decathlons while I was there,” Marra wrote. “I used to see Jim (Deegan) when I was the head coach at San Francisco State (1981-93) and we would both be at the NCAA Division II championships.

“He once told me that the decathlon is first a running event. That stuck with me and guess what. . . Ashton (Eaton) is the best runner ever in decathlon history.”

At the U.S. Trials, in Eugene, Ore., Eaton ran the 100-meter-dash, the first event, in 10.21 seconds. The next day, he completed his world record effort despite adverse weather conditions.

“All signs indicate a very good performance for him in London,” Marra wrote. “Heck, the weather can’t be any worse than it was in Eugene for the Trials.”

Marra also coaches Eaton’s fiancé, Brianne Theisen, a three-time NCAA champion for Oregon in the heptathlon, a seven-event test for women. The Canadian will also compete in the London Olympics.

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