
Duplantis set to take centre stage in Lievin

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Armand Duplantis, who has twice improved the world pole vault record in the space of a week, will seek an unprecedented hat-trick on Wednesday (19) evening as the illustrious Meeting Haut-de-France Pas-de-Calais in Liévin makes its debut in the **World Athletics Indoor Tour**.

The 20-year-old US-based Swede followed up his 6.17m clearance in Torun on February 8 by adding a further centimetre in Glasgow on Sunday and, at what will be the penultimate stop on the Tour ahead of the Villa de Madrid meeting on Friday (21), has the opportunity to create further sporting history.

Given the huge margin by which he cleared the bar in Scotland the man they call – fittingly – Mondo would appear to have plenty to spare when it comes to making another advance on the 6.16m achieved by France's Renaud Lavillenie in 2014.

That said, as he as himself has opined, expecting a world record from him every time turns up is probably overdoing things...

There will nevertheless be high hopes of another coup on the part of the organisers of this

meeting, which has regained its previous stock after the extended closure of the Arena Stade Couvert from 2012 to the end of 2017 due to structural problems.

The two annual competitions held here since have restored the reputation of a meeting that can boast seven world records since its establishment in 1988, a year after home sprinter Bruno Marie-Rose had won the European indoor title on its boards with a 200m world record of 20.36.

And, whether an omen or not, three of those records have come in the pole vault.

In 1993 Bubka raised his own best mark to 6.14m – just one centimetre below where he would leave the record until it was broken by Lavillenie in 2014.

In 2002, Russia's Svetlana Feofanova set her fourth world record of the season with an effort of 4.74m, and three years later compatriot Yelena Isinbayeva took the mark on to 4.89.

If Duplantis needs anyone to help push him still higher – although it is by no means clear that he does – then there could be no better rival than Sam Kendricks, the American who last year earned his second world title in Doha, beating the young Swede on countback after both had cleared 5.97m.

Kendricks produced his own flourish in Rouen the weekend before last when he set a national indoor record of 6.01m, although that achievement was overshadowed by the breakthrough of his younger rival.

On Sunday Kendricks provided the last opposition to Duplantis, but failed at 5.84m, leaving his opponent to set the bar where he wished. Their first meeting of the season, at the Indoor Tour meeting in Karlsruhe, had been a closer affair, with the Swede winning with 6.00m ahead of Kendricks's 5.80m.

Tour titles up for grabs

Other strong contenders in what is one of five Tour point-scoring disciplines on the men's programme – the others being the 60m, 800m, 3000m and triple jump – include Brazil's Rio 2016 world champion Thiago Braz, Canada's 2015 world champion Shawn Barber and Poland's 2011 world champion Pawel Wojciechowski.

The prize money of \$20,000 on offer for the individual overall winner of each event in the World Indoor Tour has already been claimed by Duplantis, who already has 36 points to his credit - three winning scores of 10 points to his credit along with two world record bonuses of three points.

Overall winners also earn automatic qualification for the next edition of the World Athletics Indoor Championships, although they will all have to take rain check on that given that this year's proposed edition in Nanjing has been postponed until 2021 because of concerns over the coronavirus epidemic.

Kszczot and Zango sharing the spotlight

While Duplantis ponders on the possibility of a world record hat-trick, Poland's Adam Kszczot has his own realistic ambitions of a third consecutive flourish, having won the overall 800m title in 2016 and 2018.



Hugues Fabrice Zango jumping to bronze in Doha (Getty Images) © Copyright

The world indoor champion's first Tour victory Saturday, where he finished 0.18 ahead of Kenya's Cornelius Tuwei, established him on 24 points - 11 clear of his nearest challenger, Germany's Marc Reuther. Both Tuwei and Reuther are in the field here.

Meanwhile the men's triple jump offers another rising star of the sport, Hugues Fabrice Zango of Burkina Faso, to offer further evidence of his talent. The world bronze medallist produced the leap of his life at the recent Meeting de Paris, setting an outright African record of 17.77m.

The performance puts him equal fourth on the world indoor all-time list and just 15 centimetres shy of the world indoor record held by his coach, Teddy Tamgho, whose meeting record of 17.64m, set in 2011, looks well within his capability.

Zango's rivals include Azerbaijan's 34-year-old former Cuban athlete Alexis Copello, the 2009 world bronze medallist.

Ali vs Clemons on 60m hurdles showdown

The 60m hurdles is one of three point-scoring events on the women's programme – the others being the 1500m and long jump – and it offers world champion Nia Ali of the United States an early opportunity to put right the mid-race power failure that allowed Alina Talay of Belarus to beat her in Glasgow as both were credited with 8.03.



Nia Ali wins the 60m hurdles at the World Athletics Indoor Tour meeting in Boston (Victah Sailer) © Copyright

Talay is not in Liévin but world indoor silver medallist and fellow American Christina Clemons, third in 8.04 on Saturday, and leading the standings from Talay by one point on 24, is.

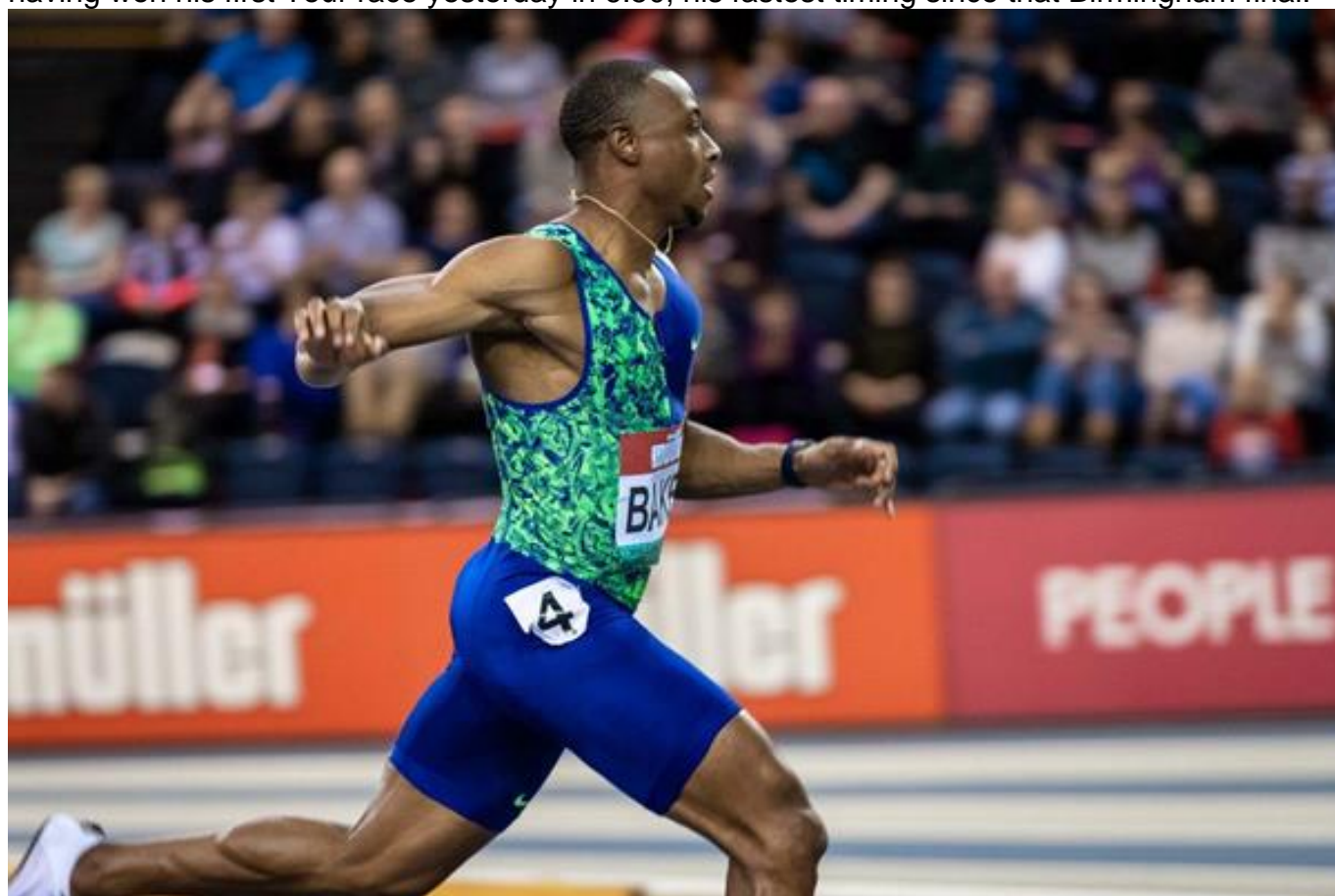
Bekh-Romanchuk in the driver's seat

While Yaroslava Mahuchikh's win in Glasgow earned her the overall women's high jump prize, her compatriot Maryna Bekh-Romanchuk still needs to dot the I's and cross the T's to secure her pre-eminence in the long jump, where she is 18 points clear of Sweden's Khaddi Sagna on 30.

Sagna is not here, but Bekh-Romanchuk faces serious opposition nevertheless in the form of Nigeria's Ese Brume, who has a best of 7.05m, and Nastassia Mironchyk-Ivanova, who has a best of 7.08m and 6.93m this season.

Baker's momentum building

In the men's 60 metres Ronnie Baker – who won bronze at the last version of the World Indoor Championships in Birmingham two years ago – has the opportunity of finishing top of the pile having won his first Tour race yesterday in 6.50, his fastest timing since that Birmingham final.



Ronnie Baker wins the 60m at the World Athletics Indoor Tour meeting in Glasgow (Dan Vernon) © Copyright

The standings are currently headed by European indoor champion Jan Volko of Slovakia, who has 20 points, but if Baker wins here and in Madrid he can take the prize. Volko was a distant third in Glasgow, 0.01sec behind the experienced Michael Rodgers of the United States.

Both are in the field here, along with Nesta Carter of Jamaica, who has a best of 6.49.

Barega back in action

In the absence of the 3000m leader, Kenya's Bethwell Birgen, who has 25 points from three races, Ethiopia's 20-year-old world 5000m silver medallist Selemon Barega, currently on 10 points having won one race, can make up ground. His main rivals appear to be compatriots Telahun Bekele and Getnut Wale, along with Bahrain's Birhanu Balew, who also has 10 points.

Ethiopia's 20-year-old world indoor 1500m champion Samuel Tefera, who set a world indoor record of 3:31.04 last year, is the name to watch in the metric mile, where the field includes Poland's European indoor champion Marcin Lewandowski and Britain's Charlie Da'Vall Grice, the fastest outdoor performer in the field with his 3:30.62 from last season.



1500m winner Axumawit Embaye at the World Athletics Indoor Tour meeting in Karlsruhe (Jean-Pierre Durand) © Copyright

Ethiopia's Axumawit Embaye, seven points clear in the women's 1500m standings on 20 points, will seek to build on her lead against a field that includes the third and fourth placed runners, compatriot Lemlem Hailu and Uganda's Winnie Nanyondo, both of whom are on 12 points.

But victory looks likely to go to another Ethiopian, Guday Tsegay, or perhaps Canada's Gabriela Debues-Stafford.

Meanwhile Britain's Jemma Reekie, winner of the Glasgow 1500m, steps down to the 800m, where she will face a field including Ethiopia's Habitam Alemu and Switzerland's double European indoor champion Selina Buchel.

Kuwait's Yaqoub Mohamed Ali, narrowly beaten by Britain's world indoor champion Andrew Pozzi in Glasgow, faces another stern challenge over the 60m hurdles in the shape of Spain's Olympic silver medallist Orlando Ortega and France's exuberant European champion and world bronze medallist Pascal Martinot-Lagarde.

In other non-scoring events, the women's 60m offers world indoor champion Murielle Ahoure of the Ivory Coast to recover her equilibrium after suffering a rare defeat yesterday in her season's debut – albeit that it came from the world and former Olympic champion Shelly-Ann Fraser-Pryce.

The women's pole vault will showcase the newly established US Indoor champion, the world silver medallist Sandi Morris, who narrowly beat London 2012 champion Jen Suhr to the title after clearing 4.90m at her third attempt.

Finally home runner Pierre Ambroise Bosse, the 2017 world 800m champion who belongs to the Lille athletics club, will round the evening off with a race over 1000 metres.
