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N.Y.'S CONVENTION OLYMPICS

Politicians positioning themselves for next race

By LAWRENCE C. LEVY

Call it the Olympics of American politics.

Starting Monday, the Democratic and Republican parties will hold their presidential nominating conventions for the first time ever on consecutive weeks. That's the same compressed two-week time period as for the international competition just concluded.

The conventions won't be entirely devoid of drama or disputes -- although nothing like the games that saw heroes crowned and crushed by one-hundredth of a second and an American gymnast denied a win under a scoring system as incomprehensible as the delegate selection process. But for all the questions about which candidate will get the bigger "bounce" from his vice-presidential pick or acceptance speech, the parties have known for months who will win their gold medals -- Barack Obama of Illinois and John McCain of Arizona.

Wait a New York minute! Barack and John who? And from where?

For many New Yorkers especially, these names and places have to seem very strange and for some, very disappointing. As Suffolk County Democratic Leader Richard Schaffer put it recently, "We were supposed to be nominating Hillary and Rudy."

A year ago, Democratic Sen. Hillary Clinton and Republican former New York City Mayor Rudy Giuliani were supposed to be the Michael Phelps of their parties. The two New Yorkers led their primary polls by wide margins. (Even billionaire New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg was flirting with a run.) With two New Yorkers at the top of their tickets for the first time in more than half a century, the conventions were supposed to be showcases for New York's new-found political clout.

Not now. As it turned out, Hillary couldn't quite catch Obama at the finish line and Rudy never really got going once the voting started. Now, the also-rans are playing key but supporting roles, and some major New Yorkers are being ignored or outright dissed with no public roles. Rep. Charles Rangel of Manhattan, for example, is in purgatory as one of Clinton's backers. So it's easy to see the conventions as something less than a celebration of the Empire State.

Instead, New Yorkers will have to shout for attention on the broader political stage. But considering what the state brings to the table -- for both parties -- attention should be paid.

Party leaders, and the candidates themselves, should be careful to remember the importance of New Yorkers in national politics -- and not just in anteing up the big campaign bucks for which every candidate flocks to the state.

The candidates certainly should keep in mind that one of them is going to win. And as Bill Clinton learned when he tried to reform health care without consulting Sen. Daniel Patrick Moynihan, a fellow Democrat, the next president will not get his agenda through Congress without Rangel, chairman of the powerful Ways and Means committee, and Charles Schumer, who led the election of a Democratic Senate majority in 2006 and is arguably the most influential senator next to the majority leader.

"So we reached for the heavens and didn't get there," Schumer said of fellow New Yorkers who supported Clinton and Giuliani. "But don't forget that we're a lot stronger congressional delegation than we were four years ago and maybe even a year ago. It's a reason to feel good about ourselves." And, he didn't have to add, for others to respect.

New York's Giuliani supporters moved on, emotionally and otherwise, a long time ago, as did state GOP Chair Joe Mondello and Rep. Peter King of Long Island, who have joined the McCain bandwagon with enthusiasm.

Clinton's supporters only recently had to surrender after a long primary. They are not in the mood for partying, much less celebrating.

"It's going to be a hard week for many delegates," said Jay Jacobs, a Clinton delegate and Nassau County Democratic leader who runs several summer camps throughout the state. "I worked hard for Hillary as a labor of love. I'll work hard for Obama but because it's my job."

That's not to say the New York delegates and other dignitaries won't do some celebrating at the many parties, sett up just about everywhere a caterer and a lobbyist can squeeze a few tables.

That's also not to say that New Yorkers won't use the time to do some serious business -- if only, as former Suffolk Republican leader Howard DeMartini recalls, to make sure visiting muck-a-mucks and their families get all the floor passes and party invitations they want.

In the spirit of the famous phrase, "All politics is local," upstate and downstate politicians will not only be hitting up national donors to help with their campaigns or trying to impress the national media should they run for higher office. But you can be sure that they'll be talking among themselves as much about property tax caps and mayoral wannabes as they will about Obama's sagging polls and how they will affect local legislative and congressional races.

At a Democratic convention eight years ago, Bloomberg, then a media entrepreneur, threw a party at a famous Hollywood watering hole -- featuring the cast of the TV show "West Wing" -- all to boost what seemed to be a long-shot bid for New York City mayor. He spent a bundle and stayed hours to shake the hand of everyone in the room, even waiters.

But it was money and time well spent. Denver and Minneapolis/St. Paul will be filled with similar events, including several sponsored by New York politicians, to promote their careers and the state's products.

Rep. Kirsten Gillibrand, running for re-election in a closely watched race, decided that the potential benefits of networking in Denver outweighed the loss of campaign time in her district.

Meanwhile, could Rochester's Tom Golisano, the former gubernatorial candidate, be investing big bucks in national convention sponsorships for reasons other than boosting his campaign to oust state legislators he doesn't like?

Could Rep. Steve Israel, the ambitious Long Island moderate mentioned as a successor to Clinton in the Senate, be promoting more than Suffolk County's wines at his Denver reception?

Like Bloomberg in 2000, or especially Obama, who began his rise to fame with a masterful performance in 2004, maybe they have political Olympic dreams of their own.

And like New York, they hope that attention will be paid.

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