

Steve Prefontaine

The great interest in track athletics during the 1970s was largely inspired by Steve Prefontaine. He died tragically young, aged twenty-four but his legend lives on and he is cited as the best runner that America ever produced. Fans loved his go for it style, sitting back was not for him and he preferred to lead the race from the front.

He was born in Coos Bay, Oregon in 1951 and started his running career participating in cross-country events at High School. He continued cross-country at the University of Oregon and ran track races too. The results were impressive and Steve Prefontaine found himself on the cover of Sports Illustrated at the young age of nineteen.

A record run in the 5,000 meters resulted in his selection for the US team to go to the Munich Olympic Games in 1972. He came very close to winning a medal and finished a respectable fourth in the final. After graduation from University, his next goal was to take part in the 1976 Olympics at Montreal. He trained hard and achieved an incredible feat, setting the US record for every event from the 2,000 meters to the 10,000 meters. It appeared that Prefontaine was an astounding athlete, even in events outside of his specialty.

Sadly, his full potential was never realized and he never made it to his second Olympic Games. He was involved in a car accident in his home state, and died whilst he was trapped underneath his overturned vehicle in May 1975. It was reported that Fontaine may have been drinking over the limit and that a second car was involved. The driver of this vehicle was interviewed but no charges were made against him. There are many memorial sites to honor his memory. One of these is called Pre's Rock, a reference to his nickname. It is a plaque placed at the location of the crash, containing his picture and a dedication. Runners who admire him leave mementos at the memorial in remembrance. A race meeting, known as the Pre Classic is organized every year to honor Steve Prefontaine.

Interest in the athlete has carried on ever since his death and he has been the subject of two feature films and a documentary. In 1997, the movie Prefontaine was released, starring Jared Leto as the runner. Billy Crudup played Steve Prefontaine in the 1998 film, Without Limits. The documentary is aptly titled, Fire On the Track.