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Steve Prefontaine: Going the Distance

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Steve Prefontaine's life was short, but his legacy is long – we still draw inspiration from the champion runner. Today we remember the life and career of a great Olympian.



Emiel Puttemans of Belgium, left, and Steve Prefontaine, of Coos Bay, Ore. run in the men's 5000-meter event at the Olympic Stadium in Munich, September 7, 1972. (AP Photo)

Born in Coos Bay, Oregon, to a father of French-Canadian descent and a mother of German ancestry, Prefontaine showed little early interest in running. Though he was an active child, he preferred team sports like football, baseball and basketball. Coaches, however, told him he lacked the necessary size to excel in these sports. Another physical attribute didn't help – one of his legs was shorter than the other.

But he noticed during an 8th grade P.E. class that he could outrun most other kids. This led him to pursue cross country distance running. His freshman year at Marshfield High School, he finished 53rd in the state meet – not bad for a kid in his first year of the sport, but a result that gave no hint of the heights he would achieve.

He upped his training regimen in the off season, participating in spring track & field in order to work on his running technique. Summers, he worked on high-mileage runs. The fall of his sophomore year, he placed sixth – a leap of 47 places. But it wasn't good enough. Prefontaine wanted to win. Obsessed with success, he overtrained in the winter, leading to a poor track and field season that spring. But by the time his junior year rolled around, he was better rested. The result? He won every single meet he competed in and took first in the state meet. He would win it again his senior year, and would break the national high school record for the two-mile at 8:41.5.

This drew the attention of legendary University of Oregon coach Bill Bowerman. A pioneer in the sport of jogging, Bowerman was the central figure in making it a national fitness craze. Though it's hard to imagine now, in the 1960s nobody ran for fun or fitness. You couldn't just walk into any shoe store and buy running shoes; there were no jogging paths, no 5K charity fun runs and if you saw your neighbor huffing down the sidewalk some cold winter morning, you'd probably worry she'd lost her mind. All that began changing in 1962 when Bowerman, inspired by a jogging club in New Zealand, imported the practice to the United States. In 1966, he co-wrote *Jogging* with the help of a cardiologist, and the book would go on to sell over a million copies. Bowerman also made a handshake agreement that he'd help Phil Knight develop and market running shoes and thus became cofounder of a little company we now know as Nike.

At the University of Oregon, he'd already coached the Ducks to three NCAA track and field championships before Prefontaine arrived. It didn't take a great coach to tell that Prefontaine had

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talent, but Bowerman and his assistant Bill Dellinger faced a challenge in containing the brash 19-year-old who arrived at their school in 1969. He was prone to pushing himself too hard in training, and wasn't good at pacing himself, at saving his best for last. He liked to flat out run as hard as he could, all the time.

"Some people create with words or with music or with a brush and paints," Prefontaine said. "I like to make something beautiful when I run. I like to make people stop and say, 'I've never seen anyone run like that before.' It's more than just a race, it's a style."

That style endeared him to the public, and soon fans were packing Oregon's Hayward Field to watch him. Throughout his collegiate career, Prefontaine was virtually unbeatable, never losing a race that was more than one mile long and winning 3 NCAA Cross Country Championships and 4 straight NCAA Track & Field Championships. The only year he didn't take the cross country title was in 1972, when he sat out to compete in the Munich Olympic Games.

The Olympics would provide Prefontaine with his only big career disappointment. Leading the 5,000 meters after the first mile, he was overtaken by Finland's Lasse Viren and then in a last ditch effort to catch Viren, ended up tiring himself out and dropping all the way to fourth. On one level, the finish probably didn't bother Prefontaine. He might have been able to coast into second, but that wasn't his style. It was gold or it was nothing.

By the time he was 24 years old, he held the American record in all 8 events between 2,000 and 10,000 meters. He was the biggest track and field star in the country, but you wouldn't have guessed if you'd visited his home. In the 1970s, the rules for retaining the amateur status needed to compete in the Olympics stipulated that Prefontaine could make no more than \$3 a day from running. He worked part-time in a bar and lived in a trailer while he trained for the 1976 Montreal Olympics.

But he would never get his gold. On May 30, 1975, Prefontaine was returning from a party near the University of Oregon campus when he swerved into another car. His MGB convertible flipped, pinning him underneath, and he died from his injuries. Disputed blood alcohol tests showed he was over the legal limit at the time of the accident.

Today, fans still visit the site of his crash, leaving running shoes, race medals and other tokens at what is now the Prefontaine Memorial Park. Two feature films were made about his short life, and each year in his hometown of Coos Bay, a memorial 10K race is held in his honor. On the 30th anniversary of his death, Nike aired commemorative TV commercials to honor the runner who'd helped catapult distance running into the national consciousness. And he still holds a special place in the hearts of fellow runners.

Alberto Salazar, former American record holder in the 5,000 and 10,000 meters and three-time winner of the New York City Marathon, said, "Pre inspired a whole generation of American distance runners to excel. He made running cool. He created the whole idea of training really hard and going for it."

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