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# Legacy of Prefontaine still lives on

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Steve Prefontaine's run-from-the-front style served him well at Oregon. Getty Images



Doug Williams

Steve Bence has driven up to Pre's Rock countless times over the past 38 years. Every visit is different.

Some days it's quiet and he feels the presence of Steve Prefontaine, his former University of Oregon teammate. On other days, the little spot at the bend of the narrow road in Eugene, Ore., is crowded with visitors taking pictures and leaving tributes -- track shoes, race bib numbers, singlets, hats, medals and heartfelt handwritten notes -- around a granite monument to Prefontaine.

It's a shrine, and people from across the country and the world visit just hoping to get a little closer to the dynamic distance star who set every American record from 2,000 to 10,000 meters by the time he died at the site in a late-night car crash in 1975. Bence, a longtime Nike executive, sometimes brings company employees to Eugene from Beaverton to learn about Nike's roots.

On those trips, he usually stops at Pre's Rock to give them an idea what "Pre" was like.

"I try to tell at least one personal story with him, just to make him real," Bence says. "It's not just some mythical guy. He was a runner and a friend."

Often after he speaks, people approach to ask questions or to take his picture. They've read about Pre in books, seen the documentary or the two dramatic films about his life, or been inspired by his quotes and his go-for-broke running style. Bence understands.

"It's kind of like if they can touch me, I touched Pre, and so therefore if they touch me they touch a person who touched Pre," says Bence.

He has no single explanation for why Prefontaine, who died at age 24, remains so loved and such an inspiration to so many, yet he knows it's true.

"He's been dead longer than he was alive, and he still has an impact on people," Bence says.

## Stronger with time

This year marks the 40th anniversary of Prefontaine's last race for Oregon -- when he completed an undefeated season in the fall of 1973 by winning his third NCAA individual cross country title -- and his legacy at Oregon, around Eugene, and across the state of Oregon is as strong as it's ever been.

A giant mural at Oregon's Hayward Field, where he won so many races, features multiple images of Pre. Visitors to the campus bookstore find Prefontaine posters, shirts, books and movies for sale. Incoming freshmen on orientation tours hear about his exploits and learn about nearby Pre's Rock and Pre's Trail, a public jogging path where he used to run.

His pictures and quotes adorn walls in the offices of the Daily Emerald, the student newspaper. There's a statue of Prefontaine at Nike headquarters in Beaverton, another in Portland, and a large memorial in his hometown of Coos Bay, where he is buried. That city also has a permanent exhibit of his trophies, memorabilia and photos at the Prefontaine Gallery at the Coos Art Museum.

The Ducks host the Prefontaine Classic every year (billed as the nation's premier track and field meet), and the 34th annual Prefontaine Memorial 10K race will be held Sept. 21 in Coos Bay over trails run by Pre as a teen.

Prefontaine's words live on, too, sometimes etched into the skin of runners inspired by him. The most popular: "To give anything less than your best is to sacrifice the gift."

It's probably not a surprise, then, that in Eugene -- Track Town, USA -- it's Prefontaine who rises above even a football program that has become one of the nation's best, something you won't see in other football hotbeds like Ann Arbor, Tuscaloosa or Gainesville.

Says Oregon student Jake Crump, 20, who is from Coos Bay and is an editor for the Daily Emerald: "I would say it's pretty hard to grow up in Oregon and not know Steve Prefontaine and his story."

New Oregon football coach Mark Helfrich, who also grew up in Pre's hometown, passes a picture of Prefontaine every day in the hall outside his office. And former coach Chip Kelly, who took his team to Pre's Rock in 2009 for inspiration, urged those Ducks to play the way Prefontaine ran.

"Steve Prefontaine did not care who he was running against," Kelly said at the time. "He was going to run as hard as he could for as long as he could. That's what I hope our attitude is in this football program."

To Cole Watson, a middle-distance and cross country runner at Oregon, Prefontaine's aura is "as strong as ever," and he knows other runners feel that way, too. Watson, going into his fourth year with the Ducks, was a six-time state champion at Rogue River High School in the southern part of the state. He knew about Prefontaine in grade school.

"I watched the movies before I even started running, and when I did start running, I thought, 'Man, I want to be just like this guy,' " he recalls. "You know, he's a rebel. He makes this sport that isn't about contact and hitting people -- it's not necessarily cool in a lot of other people's eyes -- and he made it cool for us."

Once Watson began running, he wanted to follow Pre's path to Eugene. Then in 2010, Watson won the Nike-Steve Prefontaine Award, given to the state's best senior high school distance runner.

"I wanted to run for Oregon, but I didn't think I would be good enough," he says. "But as I grew and got stronger, it became a reality. Oregon wasn't the first visit I took, but it was the last. You fall in love with it because all the coaches talk about 'Hayward Field magic,' and it kind of just feels right when you're here."

Pilgrims young and old are drawn to Pre's Rock to pay tribute to Oregon's biggest hero. Courtesy Daniel Wojcik

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## The allure of Pre

What is it about Prefontaine that attracts teens, 20-somethings and even non-runners who never watched him compete?

"I don't think there is one good answer," says Linda Prefontaine, Steve's sister. "I think there are many good answers."

For one, the movies and books continue to tell his story. For another, Pre was a phenomenon during

his time at Oregon, capturing championships and national headlines, packing the stands at Hayward Field with "Pre's People" and even inspiring "Stop Pre" T-shirts worn by opposing fans (countering Oregon's "Go Pre" shirts).

As author and Oregonian Ken Kesey once said: "Pre was more than a name -- it was a condition."

That legend has been passed on by word of mouth and media. Also, his story was an everyman's tale of a guy "from Nowhere, Oregon," as Linda describes it, who became "this huge star based on his own hard work."

"Steve knew he didn't have the speed or the talent of some other runners, yet he willed himself to be great, she says. If other runners were going to beat him, Pre once said, "They are going to have to bleed to do it."

His strategy often was to storm to the early lead and force the field to chase him. It was a style that endeared him to thousands. Even in a losing 5,000-meter race at the 1972 Olympics in Munich, he captured American hearts. He jumped to the lead in a slow race with about 1,500 meters to go and dared the rest of the field to catch him. Three did, and he finished a gallant forth, totally spent and dejected.

"He knew he didn't have great speed at the end, so, you know, what are you going to do, run with the guys that have the kick and you don't, and save yourself to the end and then get your ass kicked?" Linda says. "Or are you going to try to make those guys bleed in the middle of the race and hope that they lose some of that extra oomph they have at the end, to out-kick somebody. What are your choices?"

Another part of the allure, of course, is that Prefontaine died young. People were left wondering what could have been. A gold medal at the 1976 Games? World records? Also, says Oregon professor Dr. Daniel Wojcik, Prefontaine was seen as a man of the people and a rebel. He lived in a trailer outside Eugene, worked at a tavern and spent time with his fans.

He also defied conventional running strategies, sometimes clashed with his coaches and fought the Amateur Athletic Union. Even before his death, he was compared to James Dean -- a comparison that now seems eerie. Also, Prefontaine ran in a different era.

"Something about him was true grit and just a guy who didn't compromise," says Wojcik, who has studied Prefontaine's life and written a detailed examination of the pilgrimages to Pre's Rock as part of his research into modern shrines and spiritual tourism. "I think we live in an age when a lot of athletes are seen as being corrupt or using performance-enhancing drugs or in it for the money. Prefontaine is imagined as kind of uncorrupted, you know, unadulterated."

Though the University of Oregon has produced scores of brilliant athletes, to Wojcik, Prefontaine "is hailed above the rest" in the popular imagination, his mythos attached to Hayward Field and so many other points in Eugene. He's a folk hero.

"Prefontaine really lives on," says Wojcik.

## Dominance and inspiration

After taking time off from school to compete in the 1972 Olympics, Prefontaine still had college eligibility remaining, so he came back for one final cross country season in the fall of '73. His return helped Oregon win the NCAA championship, and his winning race was a classic.

He trailed by a good margin to Western Kentucky's Nick Rose at the midpoint, but then pushed past Rose to win by more than five seconds over the 6-mile course in Spokane, Wash. His third collegiate cross country championship was added to four NCAA 3-mile track championships. In four years at Oregon, he never lost a race longer than a mile.

Today, Bence remembers Prefontaine as a friend, not a legend.

"He was just like the rest of us, a knucklehead," he says, chuckling. But he was a friend who did legendary things. "It wasn't so much about what he did or his times or his place, it was how he went about competing and living his life that inspired people."

And on race day at Hayward Field, with the stands full, Bence can still feel the excitement and anticipation that surrounded a Prefontaine race.

"He'd walk through the gate and all heads would turn," he says. "It was like everybody knew that Pre was walking into the field there. The electricity just caught on. ... He'd go flat-out every race and give it everything he had, and that's the way he was."

Linda Prefontaine is grateful that so many people still remember her brother. She's seen the people come to Pre's Rock wanting to pay their respects, and she's touched by their sincerity. Almost 40 years after his death, the name Steve Prefontaine is very much alive.

"What a great thing, to do something in that short of a life that all these years later, it's not dying, it's growing. The story is growing," she says. "Other than the ending, it's a great story, a motivating story."



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