

When sports dreams are foiled by outside events

By **Charlie Kanzig**
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Like many of you sports fans out there, my heart went out to the University of Oregon women's basketball team whose dreams of going deep into the NCAA tournament got dashed with the precautions surrounding the novel coronavirus. I felt especially empathetic for the players in their final college seasons who won't have another shot. The years of preparation, the team bonds and the thrill of fans, all swept away virtually overnight.

Of course, sports are not the end-all to human existence and happiness, but we can all relate to one degree or another to the loss of a dream. This pandemic is no one's fault. It's not based on a political decision or a declaration of war. It did, however, remind me of a similar heart-break for athletes right here in Oregon back in 1980, the year of the Moscow Olympics.

The University of Oregon has a long and colorful history of producing elite distance runners, and the late 1970s and early 80s were no exception. This was a time when Oregon runners included athletes who were not only the

top collegiate runners, but among the top in the nation, including Matt Centrowitz, Rudy Chapa (American record for 3,000 meters while in college), Alberto Salazar among the top 5,000- and 10,000-meter runners in America and winner of three consecutive New York City Marathons after graduating in 1980, and Eugene's own Bill McChesney Jr., who still owns the UO record for 5,000 meters at 13:14.8 — faster than Steve Prefontaine, Edward Cheserek, and the aforementioned stars.

Following his stellar career at South Eugene High School where he graduated in 1977 and won numerous state titles while becoming the best high school runner in the nation, McChesney was part of the Ducks' NCAA cross-country championship team along with Centrowitz, Chapa and Salazar. By 1980, when the Olympic trials were to be held in Eugene at Hayward Field, McChesney was poised to give his best shot of a finish in the top three to qualify for the Olympics.

Rumors of the United States, along with dozens of other nations, boycotting the Olympics to be held in the Soviet Union had begun to

swirl well before the trials over international displeasure with the Moscow's invasion of Afghanistan. Pressure was being applied from throughout the world for the Soviets to withdraw from Afghanistan. Negotiations on the issue continued throughout the spring of 1980.

President Jimmy Carter made the final decision to approve the boycott prior to the trials, but fans and athletes held out hope that something still might change, or they pressed on, simply to prove to themselves they were Olympic material.

McChesney had overcome a nagging Achilles tendon injury which had plagued him throughout his collegiate career, to finish third at the NCAA meet three weeks earlier, but most track and field aficionados did not consider

him likely to make the team. Among the field were the former Duck Centrowitz, who had won three consecutive U.S. titles and was among the top in the world, fellow Duck Rudy Chapa, who had run 7:37 to break the 3,000-meter American record earlier in the season, and Marty Liquori, formerly ranked first in the world for 5,000, among others.

Regardless of the boycott and the high level of competition, as McChesney toed the line on a wet evening on his home track in front of a partisan crowd for the 5,000-meter final, his mind was on one thing: finish in the top three.


According to newspaper accounts of the race (I did not attend this day of the trials, for which I am eternally regretful) the pace was slow

and the pack remained tight through the first two miles of the 3.1-mile race. With four laps to go McChesney demonstrably spit on the track and took off, a bold move reminiscent of the legendary Oregon runner and American record-holder Steve Prefontaine, and soon had opened up a 40-meter lead.

The Hayward Field crowd went wild as the hometown boy led the field, but their cheers dimmed in the last lap as he was passed first by Centrowitz and then by Dick Buerkle. McChesney found one more bit of gutsiness, for which he was well known, to hold off Jerald Jones by .29 seconds to finish third in 13:34.42.

He then kneeled down on

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