

X-Country: The Roots of Distance Running

by Garde Wells

Just about everyone is familiar with road racing. Many Eugeneans have either run in the "Butte-to-Butte" or "The Race," or they have friends who have. Surely everyone has watched at least one road race, if only because they couldn't drive through an intersection for a few minutes during one of these events.

It has only been 12 or so years, though, since the "running boom" began. When Frank Shorter won the 1972 Olympic Marathon in Munich, it took distance running out of the "freak" category in sports.

Steve Prefontaine from Coos Bay distinguished himself in the early 1970's as an awesome competitive athlete, who just happened to be a distance runner.

Bill Rodgers from the Boston area ran his way to fame and fortune in the brand new world of professional road racing, emerging as its first superstar in 1977.

These three great athletes had something in common. So did Grete Waitz (the biggest superstar in women's road running history), and Joan Benoit-Samuelson (the 1984 Olympic Marathon Gold Medalist): They all have had a strong background in cross-country running.

Just what is the sport of cross-country all about? Cross-country is long-distance running in its purest, most natural form. It involves no equipment (except for shoes, and many African runners grow up running without them); and it is a direct outgrowth of very basic activities: perhaps chasing after a wounded deer for several hours; during a hunt on foot; perhaps running from one tribal council to another as a messenger with crucial communications; perhaps surviving, escaping war or predators.

The modern sport of cross-country involves running on a several-mile-long course, ideally through the woods or across fields (in the city, some courses never leave the roads, unfortunately). In North America, cross-country is an autumn sport, roughly concurrent with the football season (which helps greatly with the sport's obscurity). Typically a high-school course is three miles or 5,000 meters, and a collegiate course is six miles/10,000 meters. It is no coincidence that these are popular road racing distances today.

In March every year, usually in Europe, the Cross-Country World Championships take place. Craig Virgin of the United States, who has been one of road racing's superstars,

has won these championships. So has Grete Waitz (more than once). Most people know of Waitz from her incredible successes in marathoning.

Though running 5,000 or 10,000 meters all-out is a very individual effort, cross-country is more of a team sport than track and field. Track and field meets comprise a dozen or more events and disciplines, whereas a cross-country meet can have 15 or 80 runners (or more), all in the same race.

In high school, collegiate or international cross-country competitions, there are usually seven runners on a team. Only the best five finishers from each squad count towards the team score. The lowest score wins, and whatever place a runner finishes in, that becomes his or her point total. This works whether there are two teams (in a dual meet) or 20 or more teams (as in the NCAA championships).

For instance, if Team A (in a dual meet) had their best five runners placing 1st, 4th, 6th, 8th and 9th, their team's score would be 28 (the total of their placings). The sixth and seventh (non-scoring) runners are important, however, because they can *displace* rival runners. If rival Team Z's top five runners finish 2nd, 3rd, 5th, 7th, and 10th, their score would be 27 points. They would win the meet. What *might* have happened in this scenario is that Team A's sixth and seventh (non-scoring) competitors finished 10th and 11th, instead of 11th and 12th. Team Z's #5 runner would *then* have placed 12th, instead of 10th, and Team A would have won the meet with a score of 28, or one point lower than Team Z's 29.

The late 70's and early 80's signalled an era of magnificent talent and competitiveness in the sport on the collegiate level. The Univ. of Oregon already had been a major force—Steve Prefontaine won the National Collegiate Athletic Association Championships (NCAA) three years in a row, an almost unbelievable feat.

In 1977, the U of O team members were: Alberto Salazar, Matt Centrowitz, Bill McChesney (three runners who went on to become the three fastest ever 5,000 meter track runners in U.S. history by 1982), Rudy Chapa, Don Clary (right now the hottest road racer in the area), and Art Boileau (also a current force in road racing). Salazar of course was the king of road racing after his collegiate career, when he won the NCAA's championship in cross-country.

The University of Texas at El Paso

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Don Clary and Kevin Ryan on their way to a 1-2 finish at the Garrie Franklin Invitational Cross-Country meet, September 19 at Lane Community College.



PHOTO BY DOUG NEWMAN

and Washington State University developed a reputation for luring mature world-class East African runners into their cross-country programs. Michael Musyoki, Suleiman Nyambui, Rudolfo Gomez, James Munyala Samson Kimombwa, Peter Koech, and Henry Rono were some of the world-class athletes who came into North America via this route.

Rono set four world track records in an 80-day period in 1978, at the end of his collegiate career. He was also the NCAA cross-country champ more than once. Rono and Washington State

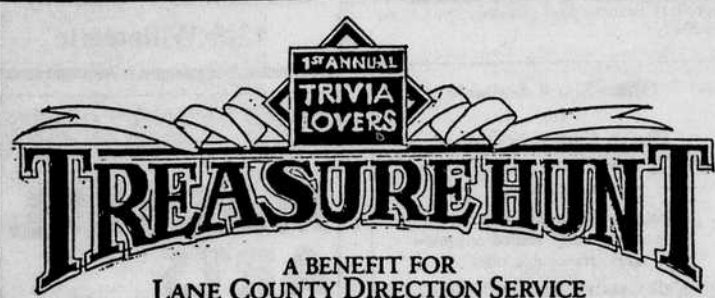
University were the arch-rivals of Salazar and the University of Oregon. Coach Bill Dellinger often has commented on the situation of African athletes in their late twenties (when distance runners hit their peak performances) competing against college age American-born athletes such as Salazar. At the end of his college running career, someone commented about Salazar: "The guy's been running against downtown Nairobi (Kenya) for the last four years."

This amazing manifestation of talent in cross-country distance run-

ning metamorphosed into the running boom. These same stars were and are the top professional road racing stars.

For some, the cross-country season is just a way to get in some good distance training during the off-season of track and field. For others, it is an end unto itself. For some athletes it is both.

It's easy to forget about cross-country with football games on the same autumn weekends, but when it comes right down to it, cross-country is what distance running is all about.



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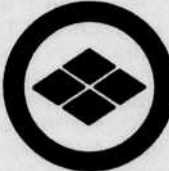
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