

Surprises, disappointment mark 1976 Trials

By JEFF NIELSON
Of the Emerald

Dr. Leroy Walker, head coach of America's 1976 men's track and field Olympic team, stood in the press interview circle as the late Sunday afternoon sunshine beat down on the last day of the Olympic Trials at Hayward Field.

It had been a long eight days for Walker, but the tension of the Trials hadn't dampened his optimism about the United States' chances at Montreal.

"We're really pleased about the athletes who have selected themselves for the team," said the coach. "It's an impressive squad that we are taking to Montreal. There was a lot of talk about those that didn't make it, but those that made the team did so on strong performances."

Such strong performances were in evidence all throughout the week. Some of the most impressive efforts included:

- A new world record of 18-8¼ in the pole vault, as Florida Track Club member Dave Roberts overcame the trauma of having a pole break under him on his first attempt at the world record to set the new mark on his third try with a borrowed pole.

- Another world mark in the decathlon competition, (hand-timed) as Bruce Jenner, third in the 1972 Trials, whipped through the two day event with a total of 8,538, breaking his own record of 8,524.

- Madeline Manning Jackson's time of 1:59.81 in the women's 800 meter final. A new American record, it marked the first time an American woman had gone under two minutes for that distance.

- A new American record in the women's mile, as Cyndy Poor outkicked rivals Jan Merrill and Francie Larrieu Lutz to take the winning spot in 4:07.32.

But the 1976 Olympic Trials will be remembered for much more than the outstanding athletic efforts of those who made the squad.

There was determination, as Oregon's own Craig Brigham fought the effects of a May mononucleosis attack to compete in the decathlon—but the weeks of missed training took its toll as Brigham missed an Olympic berth.

There was disappointment, as the number one-ranked sprinter in the world, Steve Williams, tore a muscle in his quarter-final 100 meter heat on the first day of competition — sidelining a man who was America's favorite to win both the 100 and 200 gold medals at Montreal.

And there was a supreme effort in the 10,000 final, as Garry Bjorkland ran nearly three miles with one shoe missing to finish third and sew up a berth on the team behind winner Frank Shorter and a second-place Craig Virgin.

Bjorkland was elated about his finish—and even more so because he missed the 1972 Trials with an injury to his left foot—the same one that was barefoot this time around.

"I got worried after the shoe came off," said Bjorkland. "Of course I felt it, but it didn't bother me all that much. I've waited for so long for this chance, losing a shoe wasn't going to keep me from continuing."

And while the rest of the nation's athletes were winning berths, current and former University athletes were right up there with the leaders.

Mac Williams and Lynne Winbigler, two graduates of Oregon, dominated the discus throw. Wilkins, the current world record holder at 232-6, tossed a 224-2 mark on his first throw to win while Winbigler uncorked a heave of 166-2 to win the women's competition.

Paul Geis, the sometimes-outspoken ex-Duck, silenced most of his former critics Sunday by finishing third in the 5,000 meters in 13:38.46 to gain a long-awaited Olympic berth.

Pete Shmock, a former college track all-American who still holds the freshman record at Oregon in the shot put, made a happy return to Hayward Field by hanging on for a third-place finish by heaving the shot 68-9¼ behind eventual winner and Munich veteran Al Feurbach, who won with a toss of 69-3½.

And Oregon junior Matt Centrowitz, buoyed by three weeks rest in Eugene, sped to a second-place 3:36.70 in the 1,500 final Sunday.



Three of America's best women milers — Cyndy Poor (54), Francie Larrieu Lutz (middle) and Cindy Bremser (42). Poor won the 1500 final in 4:07.32, a new American record.

It was Centrowitz's fastest time this year—and one reason was Wohlhuter.

"I wasn't gonna slow down and let Rick take over," said the 6-0, 170 pound Centrowitz. "I'd sort of lost confidence before this race because I hadn't run it in three weeks, but once the gun went off I felt entirely different—ready to run."

From the way the 1,500 began, it looked to be a duplicate of the 800 meter final. Ohio State senior Tom Byers, in a beginning flash of speed, led the pack through a 53.6 first lap, then added a second lap of almost-equal speed for halfway mark of 1:51.3.

Byers, seemingly exhausted after the first 880, ended up in last place.

Although things went fairly smoothly during the meet, not counting several foul-ups in the electronic timing, controversy flared over the selection process used for the Trials.

The United States is the only country in the world that selects Olympic athletes solely from the results of head-to-head competition, and several stars—including Williams, amateur world record shot put holder Terry Albritton, distance great Marty Liquori and steeplechaser Mike Manley—all failed to qualify for Montreal.

But, in the end, Dr. Walker said it best about those who did make it.

"Sure, the Trials are rough," he said, "but we can't afford to slack here. Montreal will be much rougher, and we can't take a chance on any uncertainty."



Some dreams do come true — especially for Paul Geis, who gained an Olympic berth with a third place finish in the 5,000 meter run.