

Pre: The legacy remains

Memories preserve legend of Prefontaine

By Scott Coe
Of the Emerald

May 30 will mark the seventh anniversary since Steve Prefontaine made his tragic exit from American track and field.

Track fans nationwide will forever remember the shocking spring night in 1975, when Prefontaine's MGB convertible crossed the center line of Skyline Drive near Hendricks Park, slammed into a wall of rock and killed the brilliant runner.

Pre's death occurred just five hours after he had delighted a Hayward Field crowd by running the second-fastest 5,000-meter race in American history at the NCAA preparation meet.

"His best years were ahead of him — he was only 24," says Bill Dellinger, Pre's former coach and the current Duck mentor. At the time of his death, Pre held seven American records, including every event from the 2,000 meters on up through the 10,000. He never lost a race of longer than a mile in Eugene, and never lost a collegiate race on a track.

All of Pre's American records have since been broken, as have his Hayward field records. The legacy of Prefontaine, however, and the effect he had on those closest to him, remains very much intact.

Former Oregon track coach Bill Bowerman considered himself one of Pre's closest friends.

"We all, of course, were devastated by his death," Bowerman says, "but his greatness continues to shine, and the type of person he was is an inspiration to us all."

Bowerman says Pre was a "fine person who really loved life and was totally dedicated to everyone around him."

Bowerman was first made aware of Prefontaine's potential by Walt McClure, Pre's high school track coach at Marshfield High School in Coos Bay.

"Walt called me and said, 'You'd better watch this little guy,'" Bowerman says. "He obviously knew what he was talking about."



Emerald photo

Before his tragic death in 1975, Steve Prefontaine was one of the greatest runners ever to perform for the Ducks.

During Prefontaine's four years at Oregon he never missed a race, a meet, a practice, or an opportunity to prove his superiority over an opponent. According to Dellinger, Pre once ran a race with a 103-degree temperature. As usual, Pre won the race, clocking a 13:24 for three miles.

"Pre didn't tell me he didn't feel well, because he thought I wouldn't let him run if I knew," Dellinger says.

Bowerman and Dellinger find little profit in making a comparison between Prefontaine and today's favorite son at Hayward Field, Alberto Salazar.

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