



File Photo

The Last Lap

A lack of money is jeopardizing Eugene's reputation as track capital of the world

BY ELLEN SCHLOTTER

On the last day of the 1980 Olympic Track and Field trials the enthusiasm of the more than 19,000 fans jammed into sun-drenched Hayward Field Stadium elevated the athletes to new heights of physical endeavor. Track-wise and equipped with a rare sense of the sport's history, the Eugene fans appreciated the efforts of all competitors, but University athletes generated the most excitement.

When Oregon's blond Leanne Warren, who had struggled in 11th place for most of the 1,500-meter final, charged around the pack and entered the home stretch in third position, the crowd broke out in instant pandemonium. Buoyed by the resounding roar, Warren held off Francie Larrieu to earn the final team berth.

One hour later, when Oregon's Bill McChesney boldly broke away from the 5,000-meter field with a mile to go, the fans, still dizzy from Warren's run, again leaped to their feet. United by his struggle, the crowd sustained an ear-splitting roar as McChesney, after being passed by two runners, hung on to place third. Exhausted, he sank to his knees and kissed the track, and the fans reveled with him.

It was a glorious way to end the trials.

When the last fans trickled out of the bleachers on that warm and breezy Sunday afternoon, intoxicated by the inspiring efforts of the Oregon runners, it was clear to both athletes and fans that the magic of that day could only have been made and appropriately savored in Eugene, Ore.

If you told those leaving the stadium that day that Hayward Field would never host another Olympic Trials they would have merely laughed and shook their heads. You may as well have insisted that Eugene would never see another rain shower. Eugene was undeniably the track capital of the United States. The legendary Oregon track teams and fabled Hayward Field were world renowned. Eugene's track pre-eminence was a tremendous source of pride and

an economic boon to the community. It would be foolish and unthinkable to let such an asset slip away.

Today, the unthinkable may be approaching a reality. A lack of money is jeopardizing Eugene's status as the track capital of the world. Faced with budget difficulties, the University Athletic Department slashed funding for the school's national powerhouse track teams, the heart and soul of Eugene's running dynasty, whose feats have cultivated Hayward Field's legendary image.

The storied stadium also has seen better days. Despite hosting the Olympic Trials in 1972, 1976 and 1980, Hayward Field recently lost the bid to host the 1988 trials to Indianapolis and must undergo a massive and costly renovation if it is ever to host another track and field competition — let alone an Olympic trials.

Athletes from around the world once considered Hayward Field the place to go to run fast, said former Olympian Mary Decker Slaney in a February interview with the Eugene Register-Guard. "I go to Europe and people talk about Hayward Field and Eugene," Slaney said. "I would hate to tell them what it's really like now."

The fate of Eugene's track reputation ultimately lies in the hands and pocketbooks of the community, a community that for decades has basked in the glory of the Oregon track teams and reaped the economic benefits generated by the city's track capital status.

The community-based Oregon Track Club has begun a fund drive to help cover Hayward Field's \$3.5 million renovation. Converting the track from the present 440-yard configuration to a 400-meter track and relocating the 72-year-old east grandstand to accommodate the new configuration are major goals of the plan. Other features include a locker room, showers, a trainer's room, weight rooms, a new scoreboard and a 300-meter warm-up track.

According to OTC officials, the project is essential if Hayward Field is to maintain major meet status, and that losing this status will adversely affect the local economy. An economic impact statement compiled by the OTC maintains that track and field contributes \$3 million to \$5 million annually to the Eugene-Springfield economy. An Olympic Trials alone would inject \$2.1 million into the community, and the World Veteran's Games, which Eugene has the potential to host in 1989 if Hayward Field is repaired,

would contribute an estimated \$6.7 million.

State Rep. David Dix, D-Eugene, responded to OTC pleas for legislative assistance by introducing a bill that, if passed, would allow the State System of Higher Education to issue revenue bonds to finance the Hayward Field renovation. Gov. Neil Goldschmidt backs the bill, which is scheduled for hearings in May. Dix hopes that in this legislative session, the state will issue \$750,000 to \$1 million in bonds, which would finance the project's most pressing needs, bringing the east grandstand up to code and improving the field house under the west grandstand.

"The reason I got interested in the project, and I'm not a track fan, is that it's a question of jobs," Dix says.

Over the next five years, five major meets that would bring in \$17 million to \$45 million are considering coming to Eugene but won't come unless Hayward Field is improved, Dix says. While people who come to Eugene to watch a football game usually drive down and leave on the same day, spectators of major track meets, often multi-day affairs, stay in town for several days and spend more money on area businesses, he says.

Other cities across the nation, such as Indianapolis and Tampa, Fla., are unleashing campaigns to promote and fund track and field, and the state of Oregon must follow suit, Dix says.

"Eugene is the track capital of America, and if we need to spend \$3.5 million to keep it that way we should do it. Tampa is spending a million dollars alone on advertising," he says.

"Our state is known for track and field, and the athletes want to come to Eugene," Dix says. "I think Steve Prefontaine put it best when he said, 'Eugene is not only the best place to run, it's the only place to run.'"

Larry Douglas, the Eugene Chamber of Commerce vice president, agrees that once a community has established a positive identity it is essential to protect it.

"We already have a reputation of being a track town, and that reputation is in jeopardy," he says. "It takes millions of dollars and years to develop an image, and once you have an image that's worth maintaining and you begin to see it slip away it's extremely important to do something about it."

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