

# Track great recalls Oregon career

By Erick Studenicka  
Oregon Daily Emerald

For a brief but brilliant two-year span in the late 1970s, the best American distance runner was Rudy Chapa, a University student who was barely 20 years old.

Looking back at the highlights of his career, it's not difficult to understand how Chapa attained "legend" status among Oregon track fans.

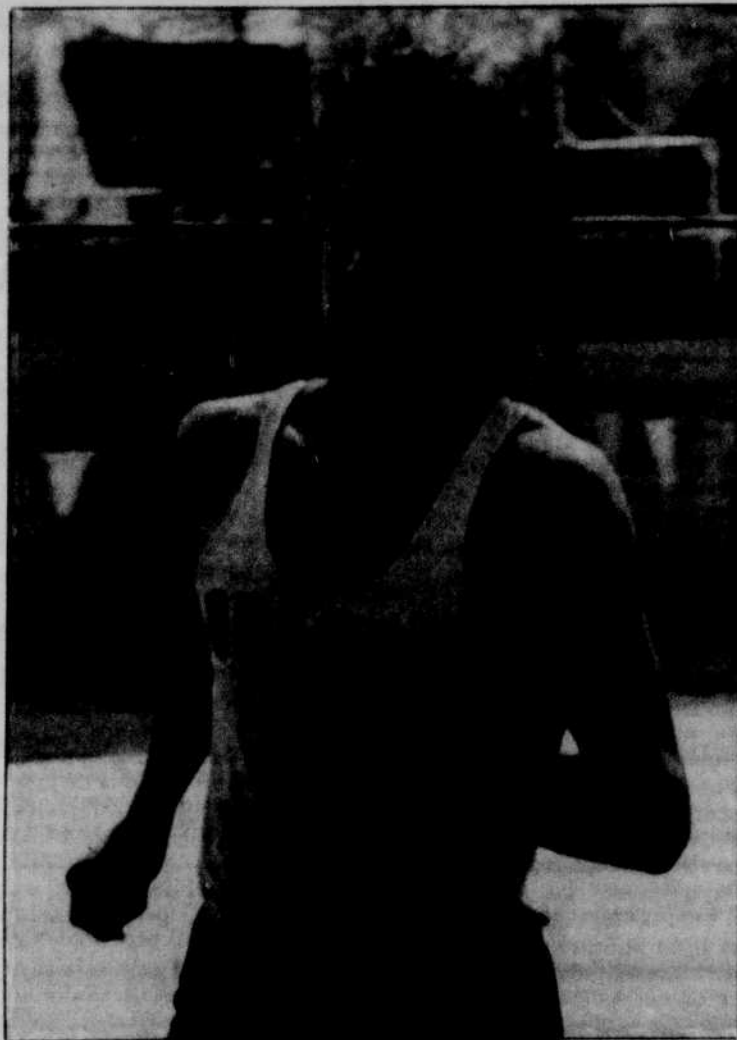
May 20, 1978 — Chapa wins the Pac-8 1,500-meter title in 3:38.9, a new meet record. Less than an hour later, he runs 5,000 meters in 13:44, breaking up the Washington State trio of Henry Rono, Joel Cheruiyot and Joshua Kimeto to give the Ducks second place in the meet.

June 3, 1978 — With the Hayward Field crowd shouting in unison, "Rudy, Rudy, Rudy," Chapa takes the lead from world record-holder Samson Kimombwa with less than a mile to go in the NCAA 5,000-meter championship. Chapa cruises to the finish in 13:35, five seconds ahead of the second-place finisher. Chapa's win was the last time an Oregon athlete won the 5,000 meter title at the NCAA track championships.

May 10, 1979 — Paced by teammate Alberto Salazar for the first mile, Chapa erases Steve Prefontaine's last remaining American record as he clocks 7:37.7 for 3,000 meters at Hayward Field. Running his final lap in 57 seconds, Chapa shattered the old record by six seconds.

"I really can't remember the individual performances," said Chapa, now an executive with Nike. "All I really remember is the wonderful dual meet season we had in 1979. It was a special group of people who worked hard to compete at a high level."

Competitive at every distance from 800 to 10,000 meters, Chapa was the rare combination of speed and endurance. He derived his speed from his graceful, "on-the-toes" style of running — a form that would eventually prove to be his downfall.



Former Oregon distance runner Rudy Chapa was one of the top runners in the nation while with the Ducks from 1978-80.

Because of stresses on his legs caused by his running form and the constant curve of the track, Chapa developed tendon injuries that caused him to miss the 1980 Olympic Trials. He recovered enough in 1981 to place ninth in the NCAA 5,000-meter final, but the now chronic injuries essentially prevented him from continuing his running career on the track.

Oregon men's track coach Bill Dellinger said that Chapa accomplished more during his collegiate career than his famous teammate, Alberto Salazar.

"During their great collegiate careers, Alberto didn't match what Rudy did," Dellinger said. "I would hate to be the judge of

who had more natural talent; they both had a lot of talent. But in terms of saying who accomplished the most on the track while in college, you would have to say Rudy did."

Former teammate Ken Martin, the Oregon school record-holder in the steeplechase, said true track fans recognize Chapa as one of the best distance runners of all time.

"You wonder what Rudy could have done if the injuries hadn't prevented him from continuing his career," Martin said. "It's possible he's overlooked because his career wasn't very long, but the real track 'nuts' know how great he was."

# Slower times prevail for distance racers

By Erick Studenicka  
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In 1978, the Oregon track team had five runners who ran less than 14 minutes in the 5,000-meter run. The slowest of the five, Art Boileau, would go on to make the Canadian Olympic team and win the Los Angeles Marathon twice.

The fastest of the group, Rudy Chapa, would go on to break the American record in the 3,000-meter run at the age of 20.

This year, the fastest time recorded by an Oregon athlete this season in the 5,000 is 14:26, set by Karl Keska at the Pepsi Invitational last week. Keska's time is 1:12 slower than Bill McChesney's school record of 13:14.

Does this mean the Oregon distance runners are digressing rather than progressing?

"I don't think that's necessarily the case," said Chapa, now an employee of Nike. "What you have at Oregon now is a lot of young runners. Be patient and one of them is going to start competing at a higher level, and he will cause the whole group to move to a higher level."

Chapa said the Oregon runners in the late 1970s had to run some extraordinary times just to compete with Washington State's Henry Rono and Joshua Kimeto.

"Without the Washington State runners, none of the fast times would have happened," Chapa said. "You had to run world-class times just to be competitive in the Pac-10. All of the world's best runners — Africans, Englishmen, the Irish — were in the collegiate system. Sometimes a 13:30 5,000 wouldn't get you anything."

"Collegians today don't have to think about competing at that level," he said. "You don't have to run a near world record to compete at the collegiate level today."

Ken Martin, the Oregon record holder in the steeplechase and the 1981 Pacific-10 Conference 5,000-meter champion, also said fast times are the result of tough competition.

"The league isn't as strong today as it was back in the late '70s," Martin said. "Distance running is cyclical and the league is just in a down cycle right now."

Martin said the Oregon runners may be overtraining, but Keska said he believes the slow times may be a result of not enough training.

"Not as many people today train as hard as they did in those days," Keska said. "The emphasis is going away from high mileage and that's where I think a lot of people are going wrong. Generally speaking, I think a lot of people would benefit from more mileage."

Keska agreed with the former Oregon runners' observations on the importance of the competition when going for fast times.

"If you've got other guys running a sub 14-minute pace, of course you're going to try to go with them, and eventually one of the days, you're going to be able to hack that pace," Keska said. "In those days it was so competitive; you could just hang on and go sub-14 race after race."

Chapa said slow collegiate times may, in the long run, be a blessing in disguise.

"I had my best races when I was 21 years old, and by the time I was 23 I was finished because of injuries," Chapa said. "It's better not to have that rush to run fast early on in a career; it's better for runners to bring themselves along gradually."

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