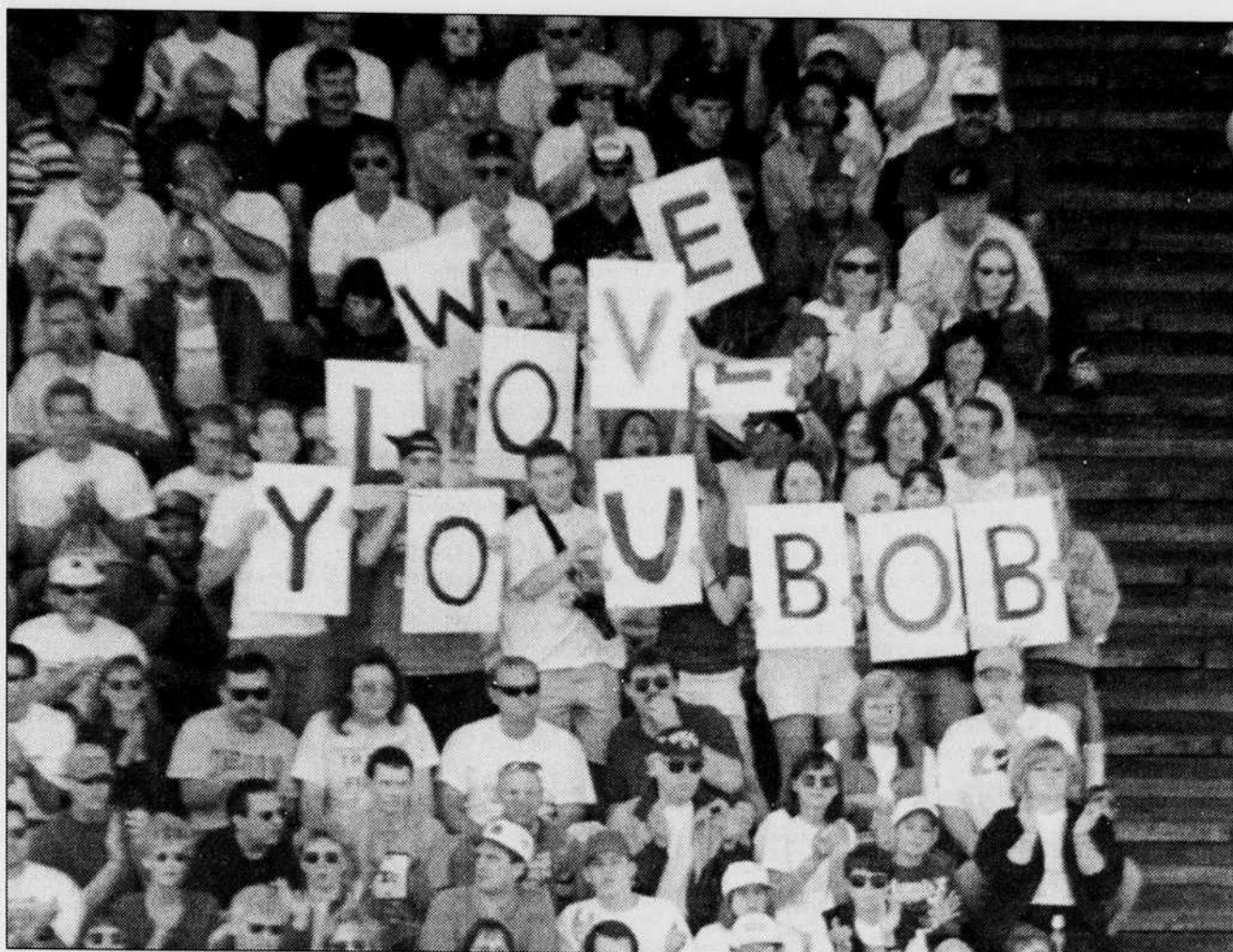




NHL Playoffs
Buffalo at Washington,
ESPN (34), 4:30 p.m.

SPORTS

Oregon Daily
Emerald



Fans show their support for distance runner Bob Kennedy during Sunday's Prefontaine Classic. Although a capacity crowd packed Hayward Field for the meet, track and field continues to struggle in the United States.

LAURA GOSS/Emerald

Pre Classic only part of the solution

Outside of Eugene, the sport of track and field is struggling to stay alive in the United States

By Alex Pond
Sports Editor

Drawing rave reviews from athletes, coaches, fans and meet organizers, Sunday's Prefontaine Classic displayed the sport of track and field at its best.

However, it's no secret, according to several people involved with the track and field world, that the sport is struggling in the United States.

"I don't want to exaggerate," said meet director Tom Jordan, "but I think the Pre is the only thing keeping post-collegiate track and field in the United States alive."

Sunday's meet was one of just two 1998 Grand Prix events scheduled to be held in the United States this year, and it could end up being the only one. A Grand Prix meet was originally scheduled to be held

in Durham, N.C., on July 25, but it was recently canceled and a new site has not yet been determined.

The reactions of several athletes to the atmosphere of the Pre Classic showed both the success of the meet and the problems with track and field in this country.

"This is the biggest crowd I've ever been in in the U.S.," said sprinter Marion Jones, who won the women's 100 meters and the long jump.

And men's sprinter Ato Boldon, who finished second to teammate Maurice Green in the 100 meters, said there's "no better place to run track and field in the United States."

"After this, you get ready for Europe because this is what Europe is like — packed house, TV showing it everywhere, people in the stands knowing what the hell is going on."

Like Jones and Boldon, many of Sunday's competitors talked about preparing for the many major meets in Europe and

how the Prefontaine is the only meet in the United States that allows them to compete in sold-out venues that carry the intensity of the Pre Classic.

According to Craig Masback, chief executive officer of USA Track & Field, and Bill Dellinger, Oregon men's track and field head coach, the problem isn't a lack of interest in the United States, but simply a lack of meets with world-class athletes that draw the interest of the casual sports fan.

"If you give people a good product, they will come to see it," Masback said last week. "The Millrose Games in New York City every February sell out Madison Square Garden because it has a good field. The Prefontaine sells out Hayward Field because it's got good runners."

"What we haven't been doing is systematically giving American fans a chance to come see the best in the world compete in track and field. They can see the best in the

Turn to **TRACK**, Page 12

Brazilians hope to keep the beat on

It is the largest sporting event in the world.

No, I'm not talking about the Super Bowl.

The Olympics? Guess again.

Michael Jordan's annual show (a.k.a. the NBA Finals)? Nope.

Sorry Hulkamaniacs. Wrestlemania is not even in the picture.

Believe it or not — love it or hate it — soccer's World Cup is the world's most-watched sporting extravaganza. According to the World Cup's official Web site, 37 billion viewers are predicted to tune in for the event with an estimated 1.7 billion alone to watch the championship match.

Still, much of this country's public treats the event with indifference.

The world-wide party gets started June 10 in Paris, when defending champion Brazil squares off with Scotland. Game 4 of the NBA Finals between Chicago and Utah is also scheduled for that day, but it is safe to say that — outside the United States — the world's attention will be elsewhere.

The last time that France hosted the World Cup, over a half-century ago in 1938, most of the world was entrenched in economic crisis as Italy defeated Hungary for its second consecutive title. Two years later, Germany invaded Paris at the command of Nazi leader Adolf Hitler.

France can only hope that this year's edition of the tournament will not forebode such trying times.

The 33-day tournament will be played in 10 French cities between 28 countries, before concluding with the noon championship match July 12 in Saint-Denis.

Although the United States takes a better team into this cup than it had when it hosted the 1994 edition, many experts believe the "Yanks" will be hard pressed to duplicate the second-round berth they earned there.

Without the benefit of playing at home and facing a daunting first-round group of three-time champion Germany, Yugoslavia and Iran, the Americans have their work cut out for them. However, this squad is capable of handling such a task.

Goalkeeper Kasey Keller, a University of Portland graduate, midfielder Claudio Reyna, forward Eric Wynalda and sweeper and captain Thomas Dooley are among those who will lead the United States.

To qualify for the second round, a team

OPINION



Tim
Pyle

Turn to **PYLE**, Page 12

Former Cougar Leon Bender found dead in his agent's home

An autopsy of the 22-year-old defensive tackle on Sunday did not reveal the cause of death

By Joel Hood
Sports Reporter

Leon Bender, a first-team All-Pacific-10 Conference defensive tackle for Washington State last season who was selected 31st overall in the April National Football League Draft, was found dead Saturday morning in the bathroom of his agent's home in north Atlanta.

An autopsy of the 6-foot-5, 300-pound Bender on Sunday failed to explain why the Oakland Raider's second-round draft pick died suddenly. Conclusive results aren't expected for two or three months, The Associated Press reported.

The 22-year-old Washington State standout was in Georgia preparing with his personal trainer for the Raiders' upcoming mini camp and had scheduled a workout with the team Saturday.

The Associated Press reported Monday that Bender suffered from epilepsy, but it was unknown whether that condition contributed to his death. Cobb County police have said they do not suspect foul play.

As the news of Bender's death was made public, friends and former teammates were shocked and saddened.

"We are saddened and stunned by the news," Washington State athletic director Rick Dickson said in a released statement Sunday. "Leon was so full of life and happiness, and to be taken so suddenly is a tragic loss for all of us. Our thoughts and concerns are for his family."

Washington State head football coach



BENDER

Mike Price also expressed his sympathies to the Bender family, which included Bender's wife Liza and two-year-old daughter Imani.

"This is a shock and a great tragedy to all of us. Our hearts go out to his parents, wife and daughter."

One of four Washington State football players from last season to be selected in the NFL Draft, Bender had 50 tackles and six and a half sacks en route to the Cougars' first Rose Bowl berth since 1916.

Bender, a native of Santee, Calif., signed a five-year, \$3.45 million contract with Oakland on May 12 and was expected to contribute heavily to a defense that ranked last in the NFL last season.

In a released statement on Monday, the Raiders' organization also expressed their sympathies for the Bender family.

"Leon was so full of life and happiness, and to be taken so suddenly is a tragic loss for all of us."

Rick Dickson
WSU athletic director