

Classic's national spotlight shines on local economy, too

Tracktown is ready to strut its stuff this weekend, and local entrepreneurs are set to entertain fans as well

By Jack Clifford
Oregon Daily Emerald

Around the beginning of this year, the city of Eugene somehow gained the label "anarchist capital of the United States." With Saturday's 26th annual Prefontaine Classic Grand Prix, however, the spirit of a fellow who was a resident here back in the early 1970s — a guy many people considered to be the rebellious type as well — is going to help reclaim the rightful tag for the city: Track and field capital of the world.

"It's fun to see people getting excited about an event that at-

tracts the best athletes in the world," Prefontaine meet director Tom Jordan said. "We have the most knowledgeable fans in the country, maybe even the world, when it comes to track and field."

For last year's silver anniversary of the meet, named in honor of legendary Oregon runner Steve Prefontaine, 12,247 off-the-field experts crowded into Hayward Field and exhorted the runners, sprinters, throwers, jumpers and vaulters to excel. Before and after the event though, some of those fans wandered the city, looking to boost the local economy.

Jordan said exit interviews have been carried out during past Pre Classics and they found that about 50 percent of the attendees were from out of town. Granted, they didn't come from too far

away — approximately 25 percent called the Portland area home and another 15 percent trekked in from smaller towns around the state. The remaining 10 percent were a hodgepodge of Northwest residents.

While all those numbers mean that the financial impact to businesses such as motels is pretty low, Jordan said, other establishments revel in the mass influx of people.

"We certainly get a lot of families in here, and some new business," said Matt Paul, kitchen manager for Studio One Cafe, which is located one block from Hayward Field. "Our place is a little smaller and harder to notice, but sometimes it does get a bit hectic in here."

Being as speedy in the morning as Maurice Greene is on an oval, however, might help avoid the usual breakfast crush, Paul said. He said his grill is steadily cranking after about 9:30 in the morning, and he sounds like an athlete when commenting on those dishes that fall just short of perfection.

"The one out of every 10 [meals] that don't turn out exactly right — yeah, sometimes people complain, but for the most part people are patient," Paul said.

One might think that certain businesses would definitely see a bump in traffic on Saturday. But at least one owner of a running shoe supply store in Eugene said his shop finishes second to the actual event.

"Actually we have a decrease in business because most people attend the meet," said Gene Solomon, co-owner of Run Pro. "Sometimes we'll get some out-of-town fans in on the Friday before."

Beyond the dollars and cents that end up in cash registers around town, Jordan said the exposure the city receives thanks to an hour of CBS coverage is immeasurable.

"We are the only event live from Eugene on national television year in and year out," he said. "We reach more people nationally than any other sporting event in Eugene."

The Oregon Track Club owns and manages the Prefontaine Classic, and the organization hires Jordan as an independent contractor. Jordan, who works with a \$400,000 budget to put on the Classic, readily admits that this heavily-showcased event is not a money-maker for those involved in producing it.

OTC is a non-profit organization, he said, designed to promote track and field in the area. People around the country may not know much about Eugene's true claim to fame — its runner-friendly environment, not its recent, more raucous image — but Jordan said the track and field participants know Hayward Field is the best place to create a commotion.

"Athletes love coming here because they know that their performances will be appreciated by the crowds," he said.

And local business people don't mind that appreciation spilling over to them.



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