

Nike's legacy rooted at Hayward

Both were big events that struck the Eugene community.

Both were events that dealt with two separate people from the Oregon track and field past who shared a common link to each other.

But both events couldn't have been more different.

On Dec. 24, 1999 renowned University track coach and co-founder of Nike, Bill Bowerman died at the age of 88.

On April 23, 2000 Nike CEO and former Oregon track athlete Phil Knight officially halted all personal donations to his alma mater as a result of the University joining the Worker Rights Consortium.

The reason both events are being brought up this week is that Hayward Field is home to the prestigious 26th annual Prefontaine Classic Grand Prix, which kicks off this Saturday at 11:15 a.m.

One of the reasons it has been a continued success is that it has been bolstered greatly over the years through Nike's monetary contributions.

A fact that not too many people are aware of is that the Pre Classic was intended to have a different name.

In 1975, the event was scheduled to be called the Bowerman Classic, in honor of the man whose remarkable Oregon coaching career lasted from 1949-72. It was a much deserved tribute to the coach who had won four national titles, led his team to top 10 finishes in the nation 16 different times and had coached 24 NCAA individual champions.

But the meet took on a whole new twist when running sensation Steve Prefontaine's tragic death on May 30, 1975, led officials to rename the classic in his name.

Still, there is no denying the

impact Bowerman had on this particular meet, on Hayward Field and on the city of Eugene itself.

"One thing that is true about the Prefontaine Classic is that it is a direct link to his legacy," Prefontaine meet director Tom Jordan told the Emerald at the time of Bowerman's death. "He was a great innovator and a great coach."

He was indeed both, but as great as his coaching was, his inventions are perhaps what will help his legacy live on forever.

For instance, are you aware that he created the rubberized asphalt track? It's probably hard to even consider the sport of track and field without it

because it is now used throughout the world.

And did you ever wonder who was one of the trendsetters in the video slow-motion craze in terms of analyzing athletes and team play? Yup, it was Bowerman. He used the technology to fully examine the technique of his runners.

His most popular invention, however, is the one that everybody knows about. Using his wife's waffle iron, he mixed together latex, leather and glue.

The result? Only the world's most popular running shoes that would soon be known as Nike shoes.

His partner in forming the Nike shoe business was Knight, who has propelled the multi-billion dollar shoe and apparel company to global success.

Bowerman's legacy will be honored at this year's Pre Classic. Before most of the events get under way, a special ceremony will be held.

At 11:32 a.m., a statue of Bowerman will be unveiled.

At that time, there will also be an introduction of Bowerman Team Members, which will be a gathering of many athletes that

competed under the legendary coach.

No word yet as to whether one of those athletes will be Knight, who met Bowerman in 1957 when he ran on the track team.

It's kind of ironic that Knight and Bowerman both are connected with this weekend, because the athlete who this event is named after was the one who helped jump start Nike into what it is today.

In 1973, Prefontaine became the first major athlete to wear the Nike shoe.

The connection with Oregon athletics and Nike seemed to be a bond that would never be broken. But alas, it all came crumbling down when Oregon joined the WRC, a labor-monitoring organization that is strongly against Nike.

"At this time, this is not a situation that can be resolved," said Knight, in his letter to the University in April. "The bonds of trust, which allowed me to give at a high level, have been shredded."

When hearing such harsh words, it makes you want to go back to Knight's reaction to Bowerman's death. When his words were not of some Nike CEO, but of a former athlete who was saddened by the loss of his mentor.

"In 1998, a magazine asked me to name my personal hero," Knight said in a released statement at the time. "Without hesitation, I named Bill Bowerman. He was for so many of us a hero, leader and — most of all — teacher. My sadness at his passing is beyond words."

One can only hope that the athlete inside of him will prevail in the future, and the legacy of his late coach and first Nike athlete will deliver him toward his beloved alma mater — and help get Oregon athletics back on the right track.

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