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Pre 1,500 set for an encore

■ Suzy Favor Hamilton returns to the Pre Classic this year and will aim to win the race she barely lost last year

By Jeff Smith
Oregon Daily Emerald

Those who witnessed last June's Prefontaine Classic will probably never forget the thrilling show put on in the women's 1,500-meter race.

In the race, Romanian Gabriela Szabo edged out Suzy Favor Hamilton in the most exciting race of the day.

Szabo's surge near the end of the race was just enough to win by .06 seconds over Favor Hamilton, who collapsed after she crossed the finish line. Szabo's win set a new Pre Classic meet record with a sizzling

time of 4:00.73.

Unfortunately, the rematch of that race won't happen this year, but Favor Hamilton will return to the Pre Classic and will face an equally tough opponent. Poland's Lidi Chojecka was announced Thursday as a participant in the 1,500-meter race at the May 27th meet at Hayward Field.

Chojecka ran the fifth-fastest 1,500 time in the world in 2000 and was ranked No. 4 in the world by Track and Field News. Favor Hamilton, however, might be the favorite, as she ran the fastest 1,500 time in the world last year. Favor Hamilton was ranked No. 7 by Track and Field News.

Szabo will not be available for this year's Classic, as she is training in South Africa.

Favor Hamilton's fastest time from a year ago was set in a race

in Oslo, where she ran the 1,500 in a time of 3:57.40. Chojecka's fifth-fastest time was also set in that race when she broke the four-minute barrier as well by finishing in 3:59.22.

The rest of the women's 1,500 field includes Lyudmila Vasilyeva of Russia, Mardrea Hyman of Jamaica, Faith Macharia of Kenya, Leah Pells of Canada, Hareg Sidelil of Ethiopia and Americans Cheri Kenah and Shayne Culpepper.

The Pre Classic takes place Sunday, May 27, at Hayward Field and will last from 11:45 a.m. to 1:50 p.m. The meet will be televised nationwide on Fox Sports Net. Tickets for the event, which are \$1.50 for reserved seats and \$15.50 for adult general admission, can be purchased by calling 1-800-WEBFOOT.

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Strawberry sent to rehab ... again

TAMPA, Fla. — A "very sick" Darryl Strawberry was given yet another chance Thursday when a judge sent the former baseball star to rehab instead of prison for going on a four-day drug binge.

"You are at bat in the bottom of the ninth with two strikes against you. You are a proven winner on the field. Now you must prove you are a winner off the field," Circuit Judge Florence Foster said.

Strawberry, 39, was ordered into a treatment program, as he had requested. He is to serve two years there, then a year of probation.

The eight-time All-Star, who has battled colon cancer and depression along with drug addiction, has five times violated the terms of his release on a 1999 conviction for drug possession and solicitation of prostitution.

If he violates his release again, he faces 18 months in a Florida prison under the judge's order.

Strawberry showed no emotion upon hearing his sentence, handed down after he pleaded for leniency.

"This case is not about Darryl Strawberry, the baseball player," Strawberry said. "This is about a person who is very sick, who's been very sick for a very long time and needs a lot of help. I just thank God I'm alive today to be in front of you to deal with the situation."

Strawberry is battling colon cancer and has mental problems more severe than previously known, his doctors said. Psychiatrists said there are signs of brain damage from years of cocaine use.

Prosecutors and Strawberry's probation officer had

wanted the one-time slugger sent to prison for 18 months.

"We hope he can succeed this time," said Pam Bondi, a spokeswoman for the prosecutor's office.

Strawberry is also required to serve 100 hours of community service speaking to young people.

Dozens of supporters, including Strawberry's wife, Charisse, asked Foster not to send Strawberry to prison, saying he is a typical addict who will relapse many times before overcoming addiction.

"We are very relieved and very happy with the results we were able to achieve," said Joe Ficarrotta, Strawberry's lawyer.

Last year, Foster placed Strawberry under house arrest after he left the Tampa drug treatment center where he had been living.

Strawberry returned to the center and stayed clean for five months until March 29, when he disappeared with a woman who was supposed to be taking him to an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting. He surfaced four days later.

The judge said she treated the celebrity like anyone else.

"I hope my decision helps Mr. Strawberry," Foster said. "Now everything is up to him ... which is true with every addict who passes through my court."

Strawberry, who played for the Mets, Giants, Dodgers and Yankees, was suspended from major league baseball last year — his third cocaine-related suspension in five years.

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Softball

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Gamez and the Ducks expected great things from junior ace Connie McMurren, who finished the 2000 season with a 16-19 record and a 1.79 ERA. This season, however, McMurren was just 9-18 with a 3.45 ERA (per seven innings), which included a losing streak of 12 games from March 12 to May 9.

Offensively, the Ducks hit a respectable .263, which was tied for last in the Pac-10, the toughest softball conference in the country. Defensively, the Ducks were the worst fielding team in the conference with a .952 fielding percentage.

In addition, as the unnamed Oregon fan alluded to in the season's final game, Gamez said the Ducks lacked the team chemistry and strong commitment that many successful teams seem to relish.

In the heart of the Pac-10 race this season, with Washington and then-top-ranked UCLA coming to town, the Ducks skipped practices for an entire week, meeting on at least one occasion to air out grievances. After the meeting, sophomore Lisa Wangler said the team chemistry improved and the Ducks finished the season playing for pride.

"It was a combination of things. A lot of different areas didn't work out and things just

didn't gel," Gamez said. "We have to put this behind us all."

But can a team just up and forget such a disappointing and frustrating season?

"I don't think it's going to be that easy to put this behind us," said Wangler, the team MVP and honorable mention all-Pac-10 selection. "All we can really do is keep improving and keep learning."

Oregon was the only Pac-10 team not to make it to the postseason. Gamez had led the Ducks to three straight NCAA Tournament appearances before this season.

"This program has been a national caliber and to say that we're on our way down would not be exact," Gamez said. "We will get back to where we were. I'm very confident of that."

The future, however, is not clear for Oregon softball. Many have speculated that Gamez's job is in jeopardy.

"I really have no idea," senior Triawn Custer said when asked what will happen to the program in the off-season. "I don't have feelings one way or another. I don't have any inclination. I haven't heard anything. I have no idea. There's a lot of talent left on this team, and whether coach Gamez is here or whether these girls are here, this team still has a lot of potential."

One thing is for sure, though. Gamez, as every Oregon coach does, will meet with Dave Heeke, an Athletic Department official who oversees softball, and Ath-

letic Director Bill Moos for a season-ending evaluation. Heeke was present at the Ducks' final game Saturday.

Despite the rough season, Gamez said he does not fear that he will lose his job.

"As far as I know, I'm going to be here," said Gamez, who has a 168-164 record at Oregon. "We'll talk about how to rectify this season, and I'm sure we'll have a good discussion on all of the issues."

On a positive note, the Ducks lose only Custer, the starting first baseman, to graduation, and will add five others next year (four freshmen and one junior college transfer).

Among the returnees are Wangler (the team's top hitter with a .367 average), sophomore Andrea Vidlund (who led the team with 11 home runs), Missy Coe (who finished second with 30 RBI), starting third baseman Lynsey Haij and sophomore Alyssa Laux, who hit .353 en route to being named to the all-region team.

McMurren said she hopes she will not forget the bruises of this season, but rather work that much harder in the off-season to not have a repeat next year.

"I may not be one of the top 10 pitchers, but I know I can compete in the Pac-10," McMurren said. "I just need to have the confidence to get the job done, which is something that got away from me this year. I just need to come back as cocky as ever."

And so, too, do the Ducks.