

# Forever Pre

Steve Prefontaine's legendary life and even more legendary death etched him into the memories of many fans

**Mindi Rice**  
Sports Reporter

Eight days before the first-ever Bowerman Classic was scheduled to happen at Hayward Field, legendary Oregon runner Steve Prefontaine died in a car accident.

On June 7, 1975, fans at Hayward Field witnessed two runners set an identical world record in the 220-meter run and a new Hayward record in the 100 — all in the first Prefontaine Classic.

"I don't just go out there and run," Prefontaine once said. "I like to give

people watching something exciting."

In his 24 years, Prefontaine owned every American record between 2,000 and 10,000 meters. He also held eight collegiate records in his days at Oregon.

Prefontaine broke American records — his own and others — 14 different times.

"A lot of people run a race to see who is fastest," Prefontaine had said. "I run to see who has the most guts, who can punish himself into exhausting pace, and then at the end, punish himself even more. Nobody is going to win a 5,000 meter race after running an easy two miles. Not with me. If I lose forcing the pace all the way, well, at least I can live with myself."

In 38 races he ran at Hayward Field between 1970 and 1975, Prefontaine lost only three — all in the

one mile. His first loss was at the Twilight Meet his freshman season. His second loss came at the same meet one year later.

His final loss was in a rare appearance as a rabbit. He paced 1972 Olympic 800 gold medalist Dave Wottle in an attempt at the American record. Prefontaine finished 0.7 seconds behind Wottle.

"To give anything less than your best is to sacrifice your gift," Prefontaine often said.

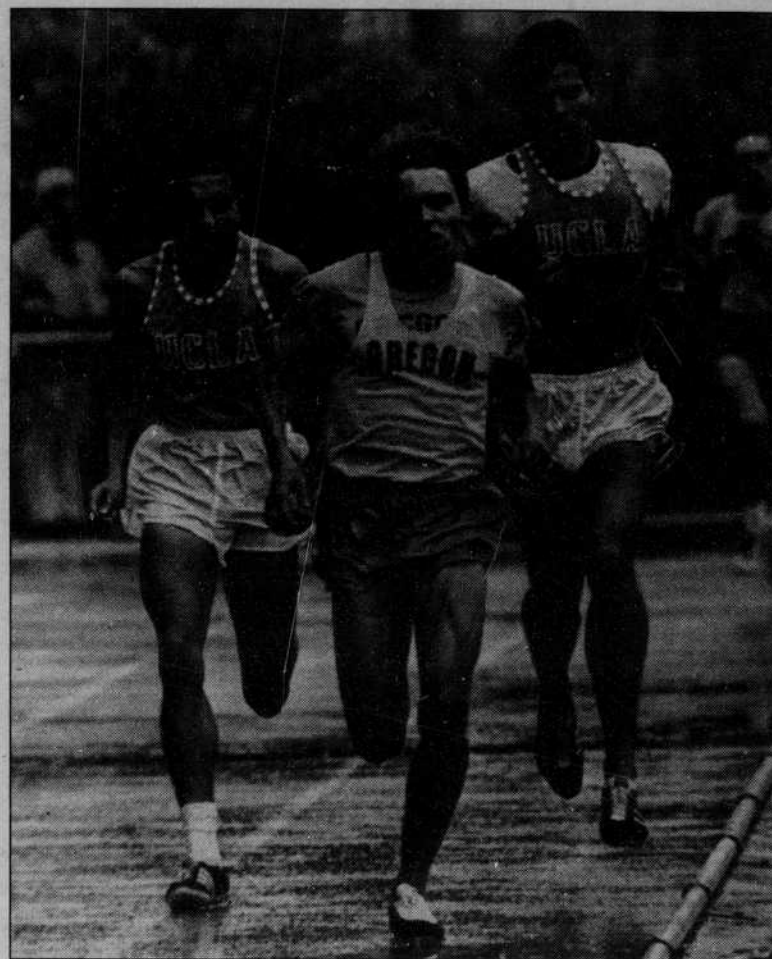
Prefontaine, who grew up in Coos Bay, attended Marshfield High School, where he was coached by former Oregon track star Walter McClure. He was undefeated in track and cross country as a junior and senior. In Corvallis his senior year, Prefontaine broke the American record in the two mile by almost seven seconds.

"How does a kid from Coos Bay, with one leg longer than the other, win races?" Prefontaine said. "All my life people have been telling me, 'You're too small, Pre. You're not fast enough, Pre. Give up your foolish dream, Steve.' But they forgot something — I have to win."

During his Oregon career, Prefontaine won seven NCAA titles. He earned his three cross country titles in 1970, 1971 and 1973. He also won a title in track during each of his collegiate seasons. He was the first collegian to win four titles in track and only the second to win three titles in cross country.

After his freshman campaign, Prefontaine was featured on the cover of Sports Illustrated in June 1970. During that year, he set an Oregon freshman record in the mile. The track title he earned that year was won with 12 stitches in his foot from a diving-board accident.

Prefontaine competed at the 1972 Summer Olympics in Munich, Germany, when he was 21 years old. He took the lead in the 5,000 with a mile to go but was passed with less than



*Emerald*

Steve Prefontaine won Eugene over from his very first freshman races, like this one.

600 meters left. He ended up finishing fourth in the race — 0.64 seconds behind the bronze-medal winner.

He continued running and training with coach Bill Dellinger until his death. He was planning on returning to the Summer Olympics in 1976 to win a medal. He was also one of the first runners to wear Nike shoes, given to him by former head coach Bill Bowerman.

Since his death, two movies — "Prefontaine" by Disney and "Without Limits" by Warner Bros. — as well as a 1995 documentary, "Fire on the Track: The Steve Prefontaine Story," have been made about his

life and career.

Prefontaine's last race was the second-fastest 5,000 in American history. Fittingly for Prefontaine, he finished second to himself.

"What I want is to be No. 1," Prefontaine often said.

Steve Roland Prefontaine was found pinned under his car at 12:40 a.m., May 30, 1975. He crashed near the intersection of Birch Lane and Skyline Drive, just east of campus.

Prefontaine was regarded as the top runner in the country when he died.

Contact the sports reporter at [mindirice@dailyemerald.com](mailto:mindirice@dailyemerald.com).

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