

Updike comes up just short of Olympics

Former EOU standout leads on final lap, settles for fifth in 3,000 steeplechase

By **DAVIS CARBAUGH**
The Observer

EUGENE — With one lap to go, no one stood between Isaac Updike and the finish line.

The former Eastern Oregon University track & field standout led the field on the final lap but ultimately finished fifth in the men's 3,000-meter steeplechase at the U.S. Olympic Trials in Eugene on Friday, June 25, 2021. The top three finishers qualified for the Tokyo Olympics, leaving Updike just two spots shy of Olympic glory.

"Regardless of how I felt, I was going to make a move with a lap to go," Updike said. "Win or lose, at that point I know that I did everything I could. It was one of the hardest races I've done in a while."

Updike clocked in with a finishing time of 8 minutes, 24.72 seconds, while Hillary Bor won the event with a time of 8:21.34. Benard Keter (8:21.81) and Mason Ferlic (8:22.05) passed Updike on the final lap to earn their spots in the Olympics.

With high temperatures reaching the mid-90s in Eugene, the weather provided a challenge for all the competitors at the trials.

According to Updike, the heat was not the biggest factor. Competing four days after the prelims put Updike out of his regular training schedule, compared to a normal routine of training two days after a race or traveling to the next event weeks later.



Isaac Updike, center, competes in the men's 3,000 steeplechase finals at the U.S. Olympic Trials in Eugene on Friday, June 25, 2021. Despite recording the fastest time across all competitors in the prelims, Updike came just two positions short of qualifying for the Olympics in Tokyo.

Chris Pietsch/The Register-Guard

"The warm-up felt a little more exacerbated than it should have that day," Updike said. "I knew from around lap two that I was in trouble."

The 29-year-old stayed with the top pack throughout the race, hanging around fourth place for most of the competition. Following lap six, Updike jumped out to the lead spot and led the field heading into the final lap.

Bor overtook the lead early in the final lap, with Keter, Ferlic and Daniel Michalski overtaking Updike on the final stretch.

"At that point I was in survival mode," Updike said.

Updike finished fifth with a time that clocked in three seconds slower than his 8:21.01 first-place finish in the steeplechase prelims.

Mountaineer mentality

While Updike came just short of a ticket to

because of Eastern Oregon, but I've finally started to catch up in the fitness part,"

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—Isaac Updike, former Eastern Oregon University track & field standout

the Tokyo Olympics, he improved drastically in the 2020 season. Updike recorded the fastest time in the preliminary rounds, and his 8:17.74 at the USATF Grand Prix on Saturday, April 24, still stands as the fastest time by an American in 2021.

"I've always been adept at the hurdling part, partly

Updike said.

Updike credits his coaching at the collegiate level for implementing a high level of skill in his form and racing tactics. The Alaska native holds the steeplechase record at EOU, as well as the outdoor record in the 5,000-meter run and the indoor record for the 3,000-meter run.

Competing in the NAIA and training at EOU helped craft Updike's mentality toward racing in national competitions.

"You don't have the same resources or funding that some NCAA schools do, so you have to get creative," Updike said. "It's pretty scrappy, it helps having previously overcome adversity that the bigger schools might not have to deal with."

Updike's 8:47 school record is nearly 13 seconds ahead of the next best time in the record book, which was marked by his brother Lucas Updike. Since setting that record in 2015, Updike has trimmed almost half a minute off his personal best and gone from an elite NAIA collegiate runner to one of the world's top steeplechasers.

Continuing to improve

The Olympic Trials in 2021 marked the second time Updike has competed for a spot in the Olympics at Hayward Field, coming in 12th with a time of 8:42.92 in the 2016 trials. Having trimmed off over 20 seconds since then, Updike came into the 2021 trials with a legitimate chance at a top-three finish.

"Just getting there was the goal in 2016," Updike said. "Whereas this year was a little more real because I had an honest shot and should be near the front."

For Updike, the journey to the top tier of steeplechase racing in the United States was no easy path. While competing for Empire Elite Track Club in New York, Updike has worked side jobs as a physical education teacher and as a receptionist. Prior to those jobs, he worked at Dick's Sporting Goods when he lived in Eugene for training.

Despite coming into the finals of the 3,000-meter steeplechase with the top time in the field, Updike had no major sponsorships or endorsements. That all changed on the day of the finals, when Updike signed a three-year deal with Nike that will endure through the 2024 U.S. Olympic Trials.

Updike will compete in a number of professional races in the U.S. and Europe before preparing for the 2022 World Championships in Eugene on July 15, 2022. The COVID-19 pandemic pushed back the 2020 Olympics Trials to 2021, but the next Olympics will still take place in 2024. This presents Updike and other athletes with a quicker turnaround to possibly qualify for the next Olympics.

The La Grande High School Class of 2021

senior parents would like to take a moment to thank all of the local businesses and individuals who provided so generously toward this year's LHS drug and alcohol-free grad night party. We had record breaking turnout for this year's event which provided our graduating seniors a safe, fun evening full of games, prizes, movies, food carts and even the chance to win a car thanks to the generosity of **Legacy Chrysler Jeep Dodge Ram of Island City**.



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