

Steve Prefontaine

"The time you won your town the race
We chaired you through the market place;
Man and boy stood cheering by,
And home we brought you shoulder high.

Today, the road all runners come,
Shoulder-high we bring you home,
And set you at your threshold down,
Townsmen of a stiller town. . . ." A.E. Housman

I've always been a runner. Twenty-five years ago I ran the berm lines, the base camp perimeters at Cu Chi and Dau Tieng, Vietnam. My parents sent magazines and news clippings squeezed inside boxes of chocolate chip cookies to bolster my spirits and strengthen the home link. The sports world, particularly the Olympic Committee and the track and field faithful, were buzzing about Steve Prefontaine, a slight, Dennis the Menace looking kid from Coos Bay, Oregon. A Sports Illustrated magazine I received from the U.S. in 1970 had his picture on the cover, competing for the University of Oregon in Eugene.

After my discharge from the Army, I returned home to attend graduate school in Eugene. By the early '70's Eugene justly considered itself the Capital of Track and Field. Scores of the country's finest men's long and middle-distance runners coursed through the city's rolling foothills, Spencer's Butte, and Hendricks Park. Wade Bell, Archie San Romani, Dyrrol Bureson, Jim Grelle, Bill Dellinger, and Roscoe Divine set the early pace through the 50's and 60's. Lee Evans, Dave Wottle, Kenny Moore, Marty Liquori, Eamon Coghlan, Mike Manley, Ralph Mann, Reynaldo Brown, O.J. Simpson, Emile Puttemans, Jim Ryun and others took the baton through the 70's. In the 70's, no venue provided greater emotional electricity than did the ancient field house at Hayward Field. No athlete cast a brighter shadow over Hayward than did Steve Prefontaine. Small in stature and of humble coastal origins, his heart and spirit drove him flashing down the gun lap, a green, yellow, and blond blur, and forever into my memory.

He was my friend. His victories became, in some small way, redemption for my failures, positive proof that right-spirited action could obtain grace. I had lost faith in my country, the horrors of its war, the callousness of my fellow men. I came home emotionally transfixed, the pinnings and stability of my beliefs shaken.

In the conversations we had those long spring days on the quadrangle, I told him that running purged bitterness and disappointment for me. Two weeks before the 1972 Olympic Trials in Eugene, he said the years of constant training, the 100 to 150 mile weeks, had scoured him out inside. He promised himself a measure of leisure time, some social life, the lightness and frivolousness he had chosen to postpone.

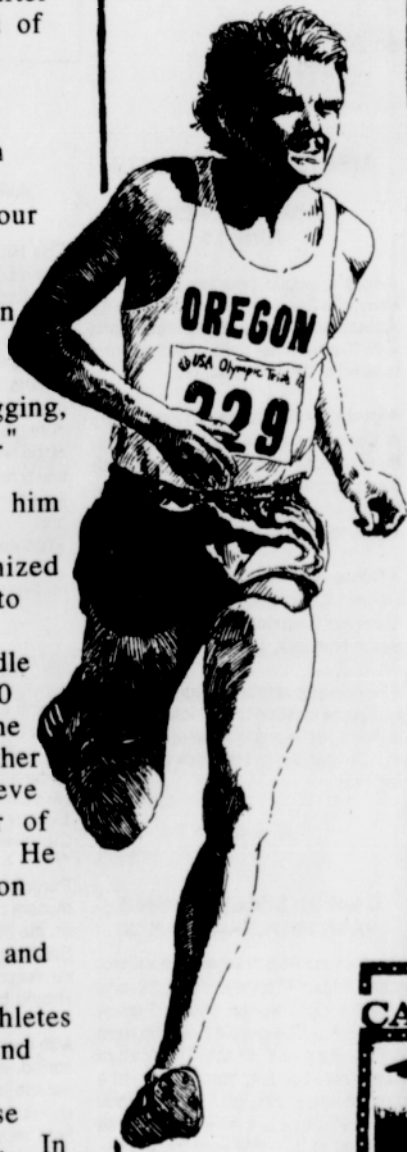
Now, 25 years later, I understand certain commercial interests intend to capitalize on his brief career and "image," fitting his life story to television and the movies as sales vehicles. When I mentioned this recently to several young people, born some years after his death, they said to me "Oh, yeah, he was that kind of arrogant runner guy, wasn't he?" Recognizing the movie and television industries' propensity toward distortion for commercial purpose, I would like to preface their productions with some observations on the "Pre" I encountered in the early 1970's. Shy and slightly awkward in social gatherings, I remember our first meeting. Quite short and lean, Steve evinced a Peter Pan perpetual boyishness. I liked his good-natured smirk, and its promise of light devilment. In competition, his mental toughness and ferocity regularly carried the day.

"When I hit that last lap," he would say, not bragging, but confidently, "I'll have already burned them out."

His fourth place finish in the '72 Olympics 5000 meters race behind the Finn, Lasse Virens, knocked him back badly. Steve always left the starting line the winner. The joint Finnish/American Meet he organized in Eugene, staged the night he died, was an attempt to regain ground lost in the Olympics.

As the American Record Holder in numerous middle distance events, and one of the finest consistent 5000 meter competitors of all time, his contributions to the history of track and field were considerable. His other contributions, equally important, need mention. Steve testified before the Oregon State Legislature in favor of stringent rules governing pollution and air quality. He regularly worked with inmates inside the state prison system with Dr. Kenneth Polk. He railed against ludicrous rules foisted off on athletes by the A.A.U. and the American Track Federation and refused to compromise. In a time of racial unease amongst athletes and college students, his associations were color blind and humanitarian.

In his brief, meteoric career, he exemplified those qualities we, in our best of selves, emulate in heroes. In pure pursuit of excellence, he strove to achieve his best, unsullied by concern for material reward or enhancement. I suspect his current chroniclers may fall short of that ideal. He was Eugene's hero and rallying force. May those of us who survive him fare as well in our lives and places.



Calvin Trillin has joined the debate on raccoons and garbage cans. From the Upper Right Edge of northern New York he suggests combination locks for garbage cans. He points out that though very clever, raccoons just don't have a head for figures.

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Bridget Snow, 1899 - 1995

Woody Allen said, "I'm not afraid of dying, I just don't want to be there when it happens". My cowardly and tentative nature can well relate, for death to me is a multitude of mysterious scenarios ranging from sweeping grandeur to timeless abyss.

When regarded as a positive transition, death offers great hope, and so Bridget Snow had been speaking of death in the month's before her own. Having always known her to be full of wit and cheer, we at first derived no meaning from her discussions of leaving us. After all, she had been making her own decisions for many decades. Jovial, yet certain, she would refer to her death as the process by which she would succumb, or "succuum", as she pronounced it. The reference was always followed by her distinctive chuckle.

When Bridget died, the sadness, guilt, and remorse that is often associated with the death of someone close was absent. She had prepared us too well. Bridget did not simply die, she decided to die, and did so in a manner that was consistent with all of the reasons that we loved her. Humorous and witty to the last, she greeted death as she would guests at one of her Sunday brunches.

In 96 years of perpetual motion, she had become many people's favorite person, including mine. Several weeks before she died, she gave me one cup of her 100 year old sourdough pancake starter. "Its one of the few things in this house thats older than me", she told me. Each time I open my refrigerator and catch a glance at this tiny jar of flour, water and yeast, I find myself smiling, irrepressibly drifting back to the multitude of stories and experiences that she has bequeathed me.

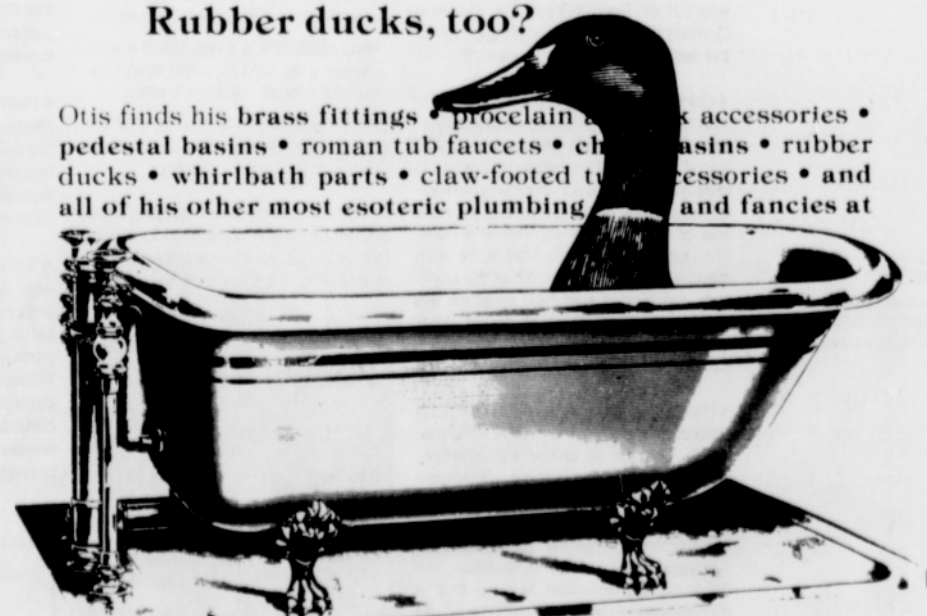
In recent years, my brother Kim had become one of Bridget's closest friends. He writes of his experience with her:

"Feet sifting through grains of sand, backs to the moody Pacific ocean, our eyes meet the mangy peaks east of Arch Cape, that still manage to emit a shimmering hint of ancient beauty. 'It was once a great forest!', Bridget said quite sternly. She blossomed with love and knowledge, and unlike a good many humans, had a dance of her own. Dawn has brought us rain, Bridget. It will not be long before the Grandfather will rise amongst the once great forest and lace his energy amongst prism drops of the Mother's tears. Tears of joy spreading rainbow smiles in honor of the life we share."

Farewell, Bridget.
Ron Logan

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