

In the early morning hours of May 30, 1975, toward the bottom of Skyline Boulevard — a route that Prefontaine had run countless times — the record-setting competitor from Coos Bay lost control of his car and crashed into the natural rock wall that still lines the street. His car flipped over and he was pinned beneath the vehicle, unable to move. By the time help arrived Prefontaine had died. He was 24 years old.

There exist manifold theories as to why Prefontaine crashed. As is the case with any icon whose life was cut short by a seemingly bizarre and random event, fans, loved ones and conspiracy theorists all have their opinions as to what brought about the end. Autopsy results showed that Prefontaine had a blood alcohol content of 0.16 percent, and many attribute his intoxication to the untimely death. Others speculate that he simply could have misjudged the velocity at which he took the curve. Some folks believe Prefontaine was swerving to avoid another car. Skid marks approximately 13 yards from the accident indicate that Prefontaine hit the brakes after losing control of the vehicle. He may have been glancing down to retrieve a cassette tape. The reality is, no one knows what happened — except for Pre, and the rock.

Newell is momentarily hesitant. His mother is ready and waiting, her pride and shutter speed primed. The soon-to-be high-school freshman is surrounded by a group of his friends, none of whom have touched the rock yet. All of them watch Newell, waiting for him to reach out and press his hand against the boulder. He is a second cousin to the great Prefontaine (a fact that his mother makes sure to reiterate) and, for him, this is a rite of passage.

“Touch it, Wyatt!” one of the boys shouts.

And then, in an act of pure volition, Newell extends his arm and touches Pre’s Rock. A smattering of applause erupts from those surrounding him. And it’s not just his friends; others have come to worship at the altar of Prefontaine, people of all ages with cameras slung and eyes eager — they also clap.

Newell smiles bashfully, and the other boys follow suit, touching the rock. The boys say they hope this pilgrimage to touch Pre’s Rock will bring them speed when competing in upcoming sporting events. At the behest of Newell’s mother the boys observe a brief moment of silence for the legend. Then they turn and race each other downhill.

Like most legendary figures whose ghost is capable of trans-generational haunting, Prefontaine is known by many as “that track guy with the mustache,” or the long-distance runner from Oregon portrayed by Jared Leto in the 1997 movie *Prefontaine*, and by Billy Crudup in the Tom Cruise produced flick *Without Limits*, released the year after. When it comes to pop culture, the Prefontaine mythology has outlived his accomplishments. Simply put, some don’t know how good he really was.

While attending the UO, Prefontaine won the NCAA Men’s Cross Country Championship three out of the four years he competed. It is argued that he would have won a fourth championship, had he not unsurprisingly opted to take the ‘72 season off in order to train for the Olympics. A poster boy for the sport who was featured on the cover of *Sports Illustrated* June 15, 1970, Prefontaine was known as an extremely aggressive runner who refused to relinquish the lead when he held it. In one of his most famous quotes, Prefontaine said: “I run to see who has the most guts.”

“At the time of his death, he [Prefontaine] held every

American record in long distance running,” Eugene Running Company owner Bob Coll says.

Put it this way: The guy was such a beast on the track that while his fans wore shirts that simply said “Legend” on them, his opponent’s fans wore shirts that said “Stop Pre.”

“It speaks volumes that someone who died in 1975 is still the most dominant figure of long distance running,” Coll says. “The allure [of Pre’s Rock] is the spirit of defiance and celebration that exists in the running community because of Pre.”

Another choice quote that helped immortalize Prefontaine — who was among other things, a relentless competitor who set a world record at the Olympic Trials in ‘72 — goes like this: “Somebody may beat me, but they are going to have to bleed to do it.”

Similar to athletes such as Jack Johnson, Venus Williams or Dennis Rodman, what Prefontaine possessed was a boisterous personality that accentuated his immense talent. He transcended the world of sport not only because he was such a master of his craft but because he approached his sport with the passion of an artist and the attrition of a soldier. That’s why he is a legend, not just in Eugene but everywhere. This is why “his people” (as he called them), a religion of runners and track fans bound by sweaty sneakers and released by starting pistols, still pay homage to him.

At the base of Pre’s Rock sit offerings — flowers, pictures, medals, medallions, handwritten letters detailing love affairs with middle and long-distance running — tokens of adoration left by fans from all over the country. Because that is what separates legend from life, legends do not die. **EW**

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