

# SEASIDE Sports



Summer Sports

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## How living legends, tragedies – and championships – made Eugene the ‘TRACK CAPITAL OF THE WORLD’

By DOUGLAS PERRY  
The Oregonian

Gov. Ben Olcott stepped before the crowd on a blustery November day in 1919.

“I dedicate this field as Hayward Field,” he said, then turned and tossed a football to one of the players waiting to start the venue’s inaugural game.

Not much of a speech, but it suited the utilitarian new stadium.

In the years that followed, Hayward Field would become a sports citadel, but not of the sport that launched it. The University of Oregon’s football team finally would move out in 1966, leaving Hayward as a rarity at the time: a dedicated college track-and-field stadium.

By then, its unique power had spread beyond its gates. “Track Town, USA,” Eugene soon would be called. And the “Track Capital of the World.”

The appellations were obvious ones to Oregonians, natural ones, but outsiders often questioned how this state of affairs came to be.

Even Runner’s World magazine found itself wondering in 2011 how the sport’s “capital” ended up, not in a high-profile metropolis, but in “a small city with a small airport, a sleepy, leafy university town with a reputation for hippies, timber and turf. New York City is New York City. What is Eugene doing right?”

The short answer: It played the long game, culminating this summer in it serving as host city for the World Athletics Championships, running July 15-24. Track Town, USA’s foundations were put in place with the University of Oregon’s 1903 hiring of Bill Hayward, a former professional sprinter, as well as an elite lacrosse player, casual boxer and part-time vaudevillian.

Hayward had been ensconced as a coach at the University of California, a plumb position, when the lure of Oregon fly-fishing brought him north.

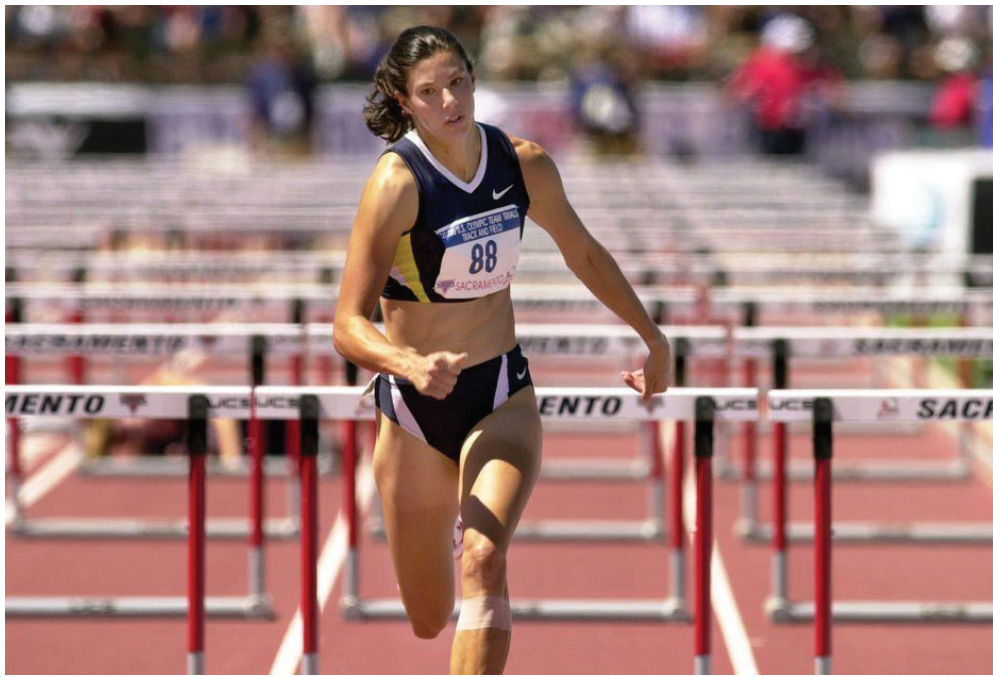
“I came for a vacation and caught what they called the Oregon spirit,” he said. “It’s not serious, but it is contagious, so they kept me here.”

### Coach’s legacy

“Colonel Bill” coached a clutch of record holders and Olympians over his 44-year tenure in Eugene, setting a high standard for the track program, even if, in that age before television and the internet, it remained little known outside the Pacific Northwest.

He was such a larger-than-life figure in the town that the stadium was named after him while he was still in the midst of his coaching career.

But Eugene only became the track capital of the country after one of Hayward’s former athletes took over.



Steven Nehl/The Oregonian

Heptathlete Kelly Blair-LaBounty won a national title while at UO and went on to compete in the 1996 Olympics.



The Oregonian

Steve Prefontaine, shown in 1973, remains an iconic figure in track.



Thomas Boyd/The Oregonian

Runners compete at Hayward Field in 2008, before the venue was rebuilt.

When the 18-year-old Bill Bowerman, the son of a former governor, arrived at UO in September 1929, Eugene was a town of some 18,000, and it looked like “the campus had been recently logged over,” Kenny Moore writes in his 2006 biography, “Bowerman and the Men of Oregon.”

Bowerman ran the 440 for Hayward at Hayward Field and earned a business degree. He was thinking about becoming a doctor, but the Great Depression continued to hold on. Medical school required money he didn’t have.

After serving in the Army during World War II, earning a Silver Star and four Bronze Stars, he returned to his alma mater, this time as a coach.

Bowerman built what was, by the early 1960s, the most dominant college track program in the country, even though the school didn’t yet offer full track scholarships. His teams won three NCAA titles in four years. Bowerman had something more than trophies. Tall, laconic, with a penetrating gaze, the man had presence. He was the Gary Cooper of track.

He didn’t even recruit athletes for his teams — he didn’t

believe in it.

“Everybody knows about the University of Oregon,” he said. “If some kid wants to come here, all he has to do is write a letter. If he doesn’t want to write, he can’t be very interested.”

Bowerman made UO a track powerhouse, but he was much more than a successful coach. He pushed the sport forward with innovations in training and equipment. (He co-founded Nike with Phil Knight, his former athlete.) And he helped popularize running as an activity for everyone.

“In Eugene, babies are teething on stopwatches,” a reporter wrote in 1970, “and at most any hour from dawn until well past dusk the streets are jammed with joggers, their wheezing in tune with the rumble of passing log trucks ...”

“Jogger” was still a relatively unfamiliar noun at the time. Boxers in training loped along roadways, but not the average American. Why would an accountant or lawyer or insurance agent do that?

The reason, for many of those wheezing joggers, was Bill Bowerman.

On a trip to remote, out-of-the-way New Zealand in 1962, he discovered that some locals went out running not to train for competition, but as a recreational activity. Stunned — and then inspired — he consulted with doctors who specialized in cardiovascular health and then published a book for the U.S. market: “Jogging: A Physical Fitness Program for All Ages.”

Eugene had something else going for it as it began to lay claim to the title of track capital of the country. It was the university town just up the road from where a scrappy kid named Steve Prefontaine grew up.

UO had seen plenty of great runners over the years: Ralph Hill, Mack Robinson, Bill Dellinger, Jim Bailey, Dyrol Burleson, Jim Grelle, Otis Davis. Prefontaine was different. The Coos Bay native had charisma. A rock ‘n’ roll attitude.

In 1970, Sports Illustrated’s editors put the 19-year-old Prefontaine, in his green-and-yellow UO kit, on the magazine’s cover, heralding him as “America’s Distance Prodigy.”

“Ah, Prefontaine!” the cover story exclaimed. “Only

a freshman, but the best prospect in the world at two miles, three miles and 5,000 meters, and in Eugene, where track is what football is in South Bend, that makes him taller than the tallest Douglas fir.”

This hardly was hyperbole. Pre and Hayward Field’s crowds soon became one.

“There was a symbiosis,” recalled Moore, the former UO runner, Olympian and author who died this year at 78. “The crowd would get louder and he would run harder. The people would see him running harder and get louder. It would go back and forth.”

Pre appeared destined for Olympic greatness when a car crash killed him in 1975. He was 24.

### ‘The greatest track town’

Books would be written about Steve Prefontaine, movies and documentaries made. But even before Pre became a myth, everyone in Eugene recognized the impact he had on both his sport and the city.

“The people in Eugene love track because of Pre,” former Villanova runner — and Prefontaine rival — Dick Buerkle said in 1978. “He

was a real entertainer. The town has always been a great track town, but he made it even more.”

Many great Oregon athletes have enjoyed, and reveled in, the Hayward Field symbiosis since Prefontaine’s time. You don’t even have to be a UO fan to be moved by it.

“I’d like to come up here every year,” UCLA coach Jim Bush said in 1977. “This is the greatest track town in America.”

After Prefontaine — and after Bowerman, who died in 1999 at 88 — the University of Oregon’s men and women have continued to win NCAA titles and set records.

And Hayward Field has solidified its reputation as “track’s Carnegie Hall,” as former UO head coach Vin Lananna put it. The stadium hosted the U.S. Olympic Trials throughout the 1970s — and then started doing so again in the 2000s. The NCAA Championships became a fixture in Eugene. Now the World Athletics Championships arrives.

It’s not the same old Hayward Field. It’s been rebuilt for the 21st century, made big enough to match its standing in the track world. But it’s still got that old aura.

### OUTDOOR NOTE

#### Land conservancy hosts BioBlitz at Cape Falcon Marine Reserve

North Coast Land Conservancy’s Marine Reserves Program is seeking participants for its Land-to-Sea Community Science BioBlitz, running now through July 17 in and around Cape Falcon Marine Reserve.

A bioblitz is a communal effort to identify and record as many distinct species in a designated area in order to collect long-term data sets. It’s also a great opportunity to get outdoors and learn more about the surrounding marine environment in a fun, engaging way.

Participating in the bioblitz at Cape

Falcon Marine Reserve is simple and requires no defined commitment. You can do it independently at your convenience.

The first step is to download the iNaturalist app onto your mobile device and join our project in iNaturalist. Then, any time during the bioblitz, head down to Short Sand Beach, Falcon Cove Beach and Neahkahnie Beach (all along the marine reserve site) to look for various species and document your observations in the app.

If you don’t know exactly what something is, don’t worry! Just snap a picture and add it to the project. Researchers and other users from around the world work to identify all recorded species in iNaturalist.

In conjunction with the monthlong project in iNaturalist, NCLC is hosting an in-person “bioblitzing” excursion from 8:30 to 10 a.m. Saturday, July 16, at Neahkahnie Beach, adjacent to Cape Falcon Marine Reserve. This activity will be led by Marine Program Coordinator Kristin Bayans, in partnership with Oregon Coast Aquarium. It is free and open to the public, but registration required.

The participant who records the most species during the monthlong project will receive an excursion with Garibaldi Charters valued at \$300. To sign up for the July 16 event or to learn more about the Land-to-Sea Community Science BioBlitz, visit NCLC.org/on-the-land or email Bayans at kristinb@nclctrust.org.

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