

Fire on Track

The best pace is a suicide pace and today looks like a good day to die

There was a kid who thought he could be the best, the greatest, the most glorious. He could endure more pain than anyone else on track could. He would do anything just to cross the finish line first. He made running beautiful, astonishing, and engrossing. A true pleasure to observe and admire. He inspired the running boom of the 1970s. He was more than a runner; he was more than an athlete; he was more than a style icon. He was Steve Prefontaine.

Who is Steve Prefontaine? Ask any runner this question, and any of them will say one thing: Steve Prefontaine is an American track and field hero. More than forty years after his death, he has been revered as the most influential long-distance runner in the US. He is not the most awarded runner. He is not the best, either. Then why is Steve Roland Prefontaine still remembered, still worshipped, still looked up to?

Steve Prefontaine was born in 1951 in a tiny town of Coos Bay in Oregon. Running became his passion in middle school. In the eighth grade, he noticed several high school cross country team members jog past the football field, an activity he then viewed as mundane. It is often claimed that he was not built as a runner, and he even confirmed that himself, saying he was too small and one of his legs was shorter than the other. However, most people, including his famed OU coach, Bill Bowerman, had something different to say. Their suggestion is that Prefontaine was just too insecure. Anger and aggressiveness that came from that alleged insecurity eventually gave him the power to win, the strength to be the first.

Steve was like an unpolished gemstone to the university recruiters when he graduated from high school. They went to see him run when he was still a student at Marshfield High School. There, he broke 19 national high school records. Pre quickly got some sort of regional fame when he enrolled in the University of Oregon to train under Bill Bowerman. Both Bowerman and his assistant coach, Bill Dellinger, were stunned by the youth's wit, sharpness and, most importantly, talent. Talent to run right to the finish line despite anguish, hatred and envy from his rivals. His

motto was, “*Somebody may beat me, but they are going to have to bleed to do that*”. That certainly was true. In 1970, at the age of nineteen, he was called a national distance-running prodigy. *Sports Illustrated* had a front-page story about him. In 1971, he won the NCAA cross-country championship with a time of 29:14:00, while the runner-up from Minnesota, Garry Bjorklund, managed only 29:21.00. Steve was only twenty.

Prefontaine, surely, cared about his looks, too. His golden hair and a recognizable mustache, his trendy bell-bottoms and tweed jackets were no less riveting than his running itself was. Admiration grew so rapidly it was almost inconceivable. When Steve was competing, his fans kept chanting, “Go Pre!” His rivals tried to let him down by wearing the “Stop Pre” T-Shirts, but that plan swiftly went to hell, when Pre himself put on one of those T-Shirts and gladly let the photographers take the ironic pictures. He had become a rock star in the world of sports. The whole country knew his face, even if some of them did not give a damn about the long-distance running. Keep in mind that this happened during the track and field trials for the now-legendary Munich Olympics. Yes, Pre’s mail long-term goal was ’72 gold at the Olympics. Not silver, not bronze. Gold. Gold in the 5,000 m race for which he was an American favorite in a competition dominated by the European runners.

His dream, unfortunately, was destined to remain a dream. In 1972, right after the tragic Munich Massacre, he managed to be only the fourth in his single entry. One of the long distance runners credited with reviving “the Flying Finns” phenomena of 1920s, Lasse Viren, came in first. Even more shocking to the American audiences and to Steve himself was that he ran and won the trials with a time of 13:22, and Viren won with a time of 13:26 at the Games. Some suggested Pre had just lost his strength, “ran out of gas”. Others asserted Pre gave Viren an advantage running on the outer edge of the track. Certain connoisseurs commented that when Pre realized he was not going to win gold, he let himself go, for he did not need neither silver, nor bronze. *To give anything less than your best is to sacrifice the talent.*

This grandiose failure stung Steve bitterly, but not strongly enough to quit and fall apart. He resumed fighting, winning and learning from the best of the best.

So, what makes the runners of today worship him so feverishly? Decidedly not his Munich performance, for which he was obviously unprepared. Maybe it is his cross-country championship wins, because that is what drew undeniable attention to him. Maybe his aggressive, ardent running style, for some of the young aspiring runners now copy it. However, what cemented his reputation as a legend was his fierce struggle with the AAU rules regarding amateur status of the runners and the reasons for its withdrawal.

Let us dip in the history of the amateur running of the seventies. At the time, no runner could take money for his or her performance, compete with professionals, take any endorsements and benefits or sign any contracts with a sponsor, unless they wanted to go pro, lose the amateur status and say goodbye to participation in Olympic Games. Athletes had to make ends meet doing odd jobs and trying somehow to get time for training. Steve did not think it was right. He spoke for the rights of athletes to make time for rigorous daily training, and himself sign a deal with Bill Bowerman's company, *Nike*, in 1973. *Nike*, in turn, built a legend out of itself based on Prefontaine's genius.

Sadly, Steve could never fulfill his biggest dream of winning the Olympic Gold, for which he was training balls-out every single day. On May 31, 1975, being only twenty four, he tragically died in a car crash while returning home from the NCAA Prep meet at Hayward Field in Eugene, where he won a 5,000 m race.

Steve Prefontaine had touched so many hearts with his gift, personality and dedication that when his coach finished the eulogy, people on the stands got up en masse and started chanting, "Go Pre! Go, Pre! Go, Pre!" Just like in his glorious running days...

His grateful fans erected a memorial in his honor, which they named the Pre's Rock. They engraved the following words:

"PRE"

For your dedication and loyalty

To your principles and beliefs...

For your love, warmth, and friendship

For your family and friends...

You are missed by so many

And you will never be forgotten...

During his career, Prefontaine won 120 of the 153 races he ran, and never lost a collegiate (NCAA) track race longer than one mile at the University of Oregon. Once he held US records in every single long-distance event from 2,000 m to 10,000 m.

The legend of Prefontaine lives on and will live forever, for as long as there is a passion for running.

I'm going to work so that it's a pure guts race at the end, and if it is, I am the only one who can win it.