



Dies in accident

Steve Prefontaine, America's best distance runner, was killed in an auto accident early this morning near Eugene, Ore.

Steve Prefontaine killed in auto crash

4/30/75

EUGENE, Ore. (AP) — Steve Prefontaine, this country's finest distance runner and one of its most controversial amateur athletes, was killed in an automobile accident early today, little more than four hours after he ran the second fastest 5,000 meters by an American.

Police said Prefontaine, who was 24, was pinned under his car after it hit a rock wall at about 12:30 a.m. PDT.

The former University of

Oregon standout who finished fourth in the 5,000 meters at the 1972 Olympics had covered that distance in 13 minutes 23.8 seconds in winning the event at an NCAA preparation meet Thursday night in Eugene. The time was about 1½ seconds off Prefontaine's American record.

A high school sensation in Coos Bay, Ore., Prefontaine went on to a brilliant career at the University of Oregon and, at the time of his death, owned U.S.

records for every distance above 2,000 meters.

Bill Dellinger, Oregon track coach who had coached Prefontaine since he arrived on the Oregon campus in 1969, said the death was "a great personal loss, a great loss for all the fans of track and field. We can all reflect back to the great moments in this state and all over, wherever he competed.

"He thought he was the best in the world and was aiming for 1976," Dellinger

said when asked whether Prefontaine planned to retain his amateur status and seek a gold medal at the next Olympics.

"He turned down an offer for quite a large sum of money from the professional track people," Dellinger said. "He had to have pretty high goals set for himself or he would have accepted the offer."

Prefontaine, a longtime critic of the Amateur Athletic Union's treatment of U.S. athletes, decided to

pass up what Dellinger believed was the highest salary offer ever made by the International Track Association.

"I guess you'd have to say he was the ideal type of guy a coach likes to have," Dellinger said. "He was a talented runner, a very dedicated runner, very coachable. He asked for and followed advice very, very well. He was a year-round runner. In fact, there were times when I counseled him to take a couple

of days, maybe a couple of weeks, off to rest.

"He just told me last night he felt he was just starting to run well, that the season had just begun. He was tremendously strong last night. He was capable of running much faster if he had to."

"After a mile, I quit running for a record," Prefontaine had said after the meet.

Prefontaine, 5 feet 9 and 155 pounds, was a representative for a foreign

shoe company and was in the process of opening a beer parlor in Eugene. Before being graduated from the University of Oregon a year ago, he worked during the summer as a bartender.

He did not own any world marks, although all of his American standards were close. His 3:55.0 school record in the mile still stands.

Prefontaine, who trained hard, was often bitter over the treatment received by

amateur athletes in this country. Two months ago, when asked about running for his country, he said:

"To hell with love of country, I compete for myself."

"People say I should be running for a gold medal for the old red, white and blue and all that bull, but it's not going to be that way," he said. "I'm the one who has made all the sacrifices. Those are my American records, not the country's."

Tests indicate 'Pre' driving while drunk

EUGENE, Ore. (UPI) — Steve Prefontaine, the United States' premier distance runner and the holder of seven American records, was drunk when he died in the crash of his sports car, an autopsy showed today.

Dr. Edward Wilson, assistant Lane County medical examiner, said the former University of Oregon star and Olympian had a blood alcohol level of .16 of 1 per cent. Under law, a person with a level of .10 is regarded as intoxicated.

The colorful and controversial Prefontaine, 24, was alone in his convertible Friday when it veered over the center line of a Eugene street, jumped

a curb, smashed into a stone embankment and flipped over, pinning him beneath the vehicle.

Dr. Wilson said Prefontaine's death was caused by a form of suffocation. He said the athlete's chest was compressed by the weight of the car making it impossible for him to breathe.

"He couldn't have lived for more than a minute under those circumstances, and he suffered no other injuries that would have caused his death themselves," he said.

His death created shock throughout the sports world. He was regarded as America's best in every distance from the 2,000 meters to 10,000 meters. He

held seven American records — 2,000 meters, 3,000 meters, two miles, three miles, 5,000 meters, six miles and 10,000 meters.

Prefontaine's death came only a few hours after a track meet featuring his 5,000-meter victory over Frank Shorter, his friend and Olympic marathon gold medal winner. It was a time when "Pre", as the Oregon star was known, liked to meet in good fellowship and drink a few beers with competitors.

At Munich in the 1972 games, he finished fourth in the 5,000 meters. Shorter said Prefontaine planned to compete in the 1976 games, scheduled for Montreal.

Palo Alto Times

SPORTS

26—PALO ALTO TIMES, Saturday, May 31, 1975

U.S. track stars in fist fight

SEATTLE (UPI) — On the wrong end of a quick three-punch tko at the hands of veteran Olympian Willie Davenport during a farewell dinner only hours before, pole vaulter Terry Porter of Wharton, Tex., came back looking for more in Peking Airport, but was pacified by U.S. track and field teammates more interested in returning home than standing around and watching another fight.

Trouble between Porter and Davenport began Thursday night at The International Club in Peking, where the U.S. team hosted a farewell dinner for the Chinese before departing for home after two weeks of competition in China.

Some spirits soared a little higher than others after the dinner, attended by George Bush, former U.S. ambassador to the U.N. and presently the highest ranking U.S. official in China.

Nobody seemed to be having more of a high old time than the mustached, long-haired 23-year-old Porter, who was strolling around the room and talking loudly while U.S. AAU officials were expressing their gratitude to the Chinese for the exceptional treatment the Americans received during their 16-day stay in the Peoples Republic of China.

A number of those in the room were annoyed by Porter's behavior. One of them was Davenport.

"Why don't you cool it?" asked the 32-year-old high hurdler from Baton Rouge, La., who was a gold medalist in the 1968 Olympics and a silver medalist in 1964.

Porter, who discovered mautai in

Peking—the Chinese liquid equivalent of white lightning—wasn't thrilled by Davenport's request.

One word pyramaded on top of another and soon Porter was escorted to another part of the room by some of the other American athletes.

After they went outside, words were exchanged between Porter and Davenport, and suddenly Porter swung a right that caught Davenport flush on the jaw.

Davenport, 6-1 and 185 pounds compared with Porter's 6-2 and 160, didn't wait for any advice from his corner.

Pop...pop...pop...just like Muhammad Ali, he tagged the lanky Texas pole vaulter with three short, sharp punches and Porter would have hit the ground if he had not been caught by two other members of the team.

"I was simply trying to defend myself," said Davenport, habitually a quiet nonbelligerent sort.

"I was only trying to tell him not to carry on the way he was. The next thing I know, he clipped me good on the jaw."

On the bus back to the hotel, where the U.S. team was quartered in Peking, again in the hotel Thursday night, and once more in the airport shortly before the team departed Friday, Porter mumbled some words that sounded like a challenge to Davenport.

Davenport stood his ground, and any further trouble was prevented by other team members who moved Porter away from the angry Olympic veteran.

Tribute paid to Prefontaine

EUGENE, Ore. (AP) — Friends and acquaintances of Steve Prefontaine reacted to the accidental death Friday of the star distance runner at age 24 with shock and dismay.

"The stunning news of Steve Prefontaine's death has crushed those of us who knew and admired this outstanding young athlete," said Robert Clark, president of the University of Oregon, which Prefontaine attended.

"I was personally acquainted with him and had talked with him often in recent years. We mourn for him, for his family and for the days of his glory that shall come no more."

Jim Putney, president of the Oregon Track Club, said, "On behalf of the Oregon Track Club, I can only say that we share with the world of track the tragic loss of Steve Prefontaine. Steve's life burned bright on and off the field and today we all experience a little darkness at the loss."

"I can't say anything," was the somber reaction of Frank Shorter, star runner for the Florida Track Club. "Not only was he a great runner, he was a very good friend. He was the reason I came to Eugene for last night's meet."

"I am stunned," said Bill Bowerman, a former coach of Prefontaine and coach of the U.S. Olympic track and field team in 1972. "He was the greatest athlete I ever coached, and he was a fine person. He really loved life."

Walt McClure, Prefontaine's high school coach, put it this way: "This whole town is going to be in shock for a long time."

Tests show Pre drunk when killed

EUGENE, Ore. (AP) — Distance runner Steve Prefontaine, killed in a car crash here early Friday, was legally drunk at the time of his death.

An autopsy report showed his blood alcohol level to be .16 per cent.

"Oregon law considers anyone over .10 as presumed to be intoxicated," said Dr. William Brady, Oregon state medical examiner.

He said a .16 per cent alcohol level represents five or six mixed drinks consumed within an hour to an hour and a half before the test.

"It's my professional opinion that at .16, any person would have a significantly impaired ability to operate a motor vehicle," Brady said.

Prefontaine's convertible sports car overturned on a residential street, pinning him underneath and crushing his neck and chest, making it impossible for him to breath, the medical examiner's report said, adding death by asphyxiation probably occurred within one minute of the crash. 5/3/75

Rites for Pre—'where it began'

United Press International

COOS BAY, Ore. — Memorial services for Olympic Games runner Steve Prefontaine were held today at the Marshfield High School Athletic Stadium, where he first came to national attention.

"That's where it all began, and that's where it will end," Pre's father said yesterday.

Jaako Tuominen, leader of a group of Finnish athletes recruited by Pre for a series of meets in the Northwest, said the Finns probably would delay their departure to attend the funeral services. The Finns had competed Thursday night at Hayward Field in Eugene, where the former University of Oregon star ran the 5,000 meters in 13:23.8, just 1.6 seconds off his national record.

Pre had been out with the Finns and others for a few drinks after the meet and was alone when his convertible sports car crossed the center line of a Eugene street early Friday, hit a curb and flipped, pinning him.

He was listed by the Lane County Medical Examiner's office as having .16 blood alcohol content. Under Oregon law a level of .10 per cent is considered sufficient to show intoxication.

University of Oregon athletes have scheduled a memorial service for Pre at Hayward Field for tomorrow at 8 p.m.

Even in death the controversial athlete became involved in a dispute.

His death was cited as an example of the hazards of drinking for all ages by opponents to a bill before the State Senate that would have lowered the legal drinking age in Oregon from 21 to 19. The bill was defeated Saturday.

Final tribute to Prefontaine

COOS BAY, Ore. (AP) — Distance runner Steve Prefontaine was eulogized Monday as a man who pushed hard for free international competition of athletes; one who opened the door in the United States to athletic emancipation.

"Pre, the champ, opened the international door," said Bill Bowerman, former track coach at the University of Oregon and one of Prefontaine's close associates.

The 30-minute service, attended by about 3,000, was held at Pirate Stadium at Marshfield High School here. At that site 10 years ago, Prefontaine got his start; last month he ran his last record-breaking performance in the 2,000 meters there.

Raymond Prefontaine said the decision to have his son's funeral at the stadium was because "That's where it all began and that's where it ends."

Bowerman said a tour of Finnish track and field athletes last month, arranged by Prefontaine, was the first

tour of its kind in the U.S. in half a century. A floral arrangement of a flag of Finland was presented to the family at the services on behalf of the Finnish athletes.

Prefontaine was killed in an auto accident in Eugene, Ore. on Friday, hours after running in the last of a series of track meets in the Northwest with the Finnish athletes.

Prefontaine's high school coach, Walter McClure, said Prefontaine was among the few Americans able to find greatness during his own lifetime. A cousin, Jan Prefontaine of Washington, D.C., said news reports constantly told how people in Coos Bay and Eugene, where he went to the University of Oregon, loved Prefontaine.

"Well he loved you, too," she said to the gathering, recalling other athletes who suggested Prefontaine move to other parts of the country. She said he refused to move, saying, "I could never leave my people."

Another Like Prefontaine

By Blaine Newnham
Eugene Register-Guard Sports Editor

Eugene, Ore.

PRE DIDN'T have much use for sportswriters. Sportswriters didn't have much use for Pre.

He was arrogant, he was impatient, he could be rude and he eschewed small talk.

I remember the first time I met Steve Prefontaine. He was standing on a balcony overlooking a swimming pool at the University of California following the 1971 U.S.-Russia meet at Berkeley.

I introduced myself.

"I'm not talking to reporters any more," he said. "I've decided that I'd better keep my mouth shut around newspaper people."

I mentioned his race against the Russians. I asked about his strategy, and about pace.

His eyes twinkled. He leaned back against the edge of the balcony and talked about Harald Norpoth and Michel Jazy, two of the great European runners.

"I thought you weren't going to talk to sportswriters anymore?" I asked.

"You haven't asked me any stupid questions yet," he said.

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TODAY, JOGGERS stroll respectfully past the scene of Prefontaine's death, a violent, one-car accident ten days ago on a wooded street within a mile of Hayward Field and many of his greatest races.

Three or four wreaths had been placed where Pre's car came to rest upside down, his body pinned underneath. Our newspaper has received a dozen or more poems and letters of adulation for the cocky kid from Coos Bay.

A town of joggers and runners has lost its most important citizen. It is difficult now to assess the impact of one athlete on a way of life.

Bill Bowerman, Pre's coach at the University of Oregon, called him a "tough rube."

"Pre wanted the image of a swashbuckling pirate," said Bowerman. "He never wanted people to think of him as a do-gooder. And yet he had a deep feeling for the kids."

Pre was a strange one: disliked by reporters, maligned by outsiders, revered by those who really knew him, the so-called Pre's People of Eugene.

I grew to have great respect for Prefontaine. He was, without question, the toughest competitor I have ever seen. The Oakland Raiders never had an athlete with such a will to win.

"His pride was so keen and intense that it was frightening," said Walter McClure, his high school coach in Coos Bay. "Man imposes his own limitations. Limitation was not in Steve's frame of reference."

Pre loved life. Perhaps too much. He developed many friendships on tours through Europe. He built a sauna in his home in Eugene, one which matched the best in Finland.

He drank beer after the Olympic 5000 meters in Munich. He loved parties. He partied and drank beer a few hours before he died.

For a time, Pre worked as a bartender at a local tavern called the Paddock.

"I talked to him about it," said Bowerman, "and Pre couldn't see anything wrong with it. But I asked him, 'Pre, what do you think the ten-year-old kids think?'"

Pre quit working at the Paddock. He spent much of his energy fighting people, or at least getting at them through the press. He fought the red tape and dictatorial thinking of the AAU and was immensely proud of the recent tour of the Northwest by six members of the Finnish national team, a tour Pre promoted.

He worked with kids in a local junior high school. He told them how his track career began.

"I found I was doing something I wasn't dead last at," he said. "I was at that point of giving up athletics and going down a different trail. I know one thing, if I'd done that, I wouldn't be in college



Steve Prefontaine won in this Modesto race just five days before he was killed in car crash.

right now. I'd probably be in a shack someplace in the mountains, doping it up."

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PRE WAS A product of his tough childhood, growing up in Coos Bay, a coastal town inhabited by loggers, fishermen and dock workers.

"You don't have many ways to jump," Pre said. "You can be an athlete. Athletes are very very big in Coos Bay. You can study and try to be an intellectual, but there aren't many of those. Or you can go drag the gut in your lowered Chevy with a switchblade in your pocket."

In my mind, Pre's greatest race was also his worst defeat: fourth place in the Olympic 5000 meters at Munich.

The pace was agonizingly slow, slower than the 10,000 meters a week before. Pre knew he couldn't lead the entire race and hope to win. He also knew he didn't have the speed to kick the last lap off a slow pace.

With a mile left, Pre took off. He pulled the rest of the field through one of the most exciting races ever held.

Pre battled Lasse Viren over the last 600 meters. Twice in the final 300 meters Pre tried to make his move, but got jostled, his momentum tied up in tangled feet.

At the finish, he was spent. He couldn't hang on for third and an Olympic medal. But that, to me, was Pre.

"He never ran for second or third," said Bill Bowerman, "he never even considered it."

Bowerman, who knew him best, said Pre never seriously considered turning professional, although the ITA offered him the best contract in its history.

Pre wanted the gold medal. He owned every American distance record and he was after a world record.

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BOTH PRE AND Bowerman were aware of Pre's lack of a finishing kick, and yet both thought there was another way.

"Pre felt he had to run each mile of the 5000 meters in 4:12. His three mile time would be 12:36 (the world record is 12:47.8), and yet Pre knew that probably wasn't going to be good enough to win in Montreal.

"Pre had the guts and the manhood to run a varied pace," continued Bowerman, "and that was his weapon for the next Olympics. Vladimir Kuts of Russia is the only runner to ever really use the weapon, and he destroyed every man in the field in the 1956 Olympics."

Bowerman stopped. He was talking about a man who would never run again.

"Those were the plans, those were the goals. If he had achieved that, and still didn't win at Montreal, Pre could have accepted that. There was nobody else like him."



Dan Hruby

'Pre' Family Wants Probe

EXECUTIVE SPORTS EDITOR

6/29/75

A MONTH HAS PASSED since the tragic death of premier distance runner Steve Prefontaine in an auto accident on curving Skyline boulevard in Eugene, Ore.

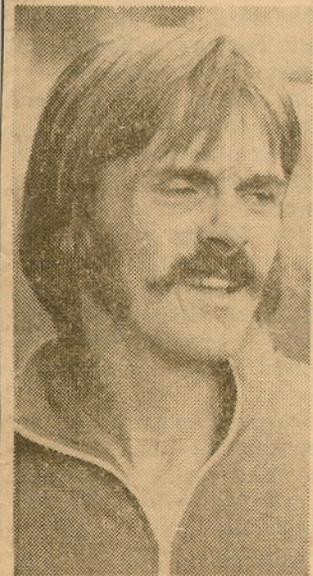
The Eugene Police Dept. has closed its books on the case.

But the Prefontaine family, the Mercury-News has learned, is dissatisfied with the police's findings and wants further exploration of the circumstances surrounding the accident.

"There are too many unanswered questions," said the runner's sister, Linda, a University of Oregon student. "If the police had done their job, this wouldn't be the case. We want the entire matter cleared up."

Police Chief Dale Allen agreed there are some loose ends.

"Sure, there are unanswered questions," he said when contacted by telephone. "Only an eye witness could provide us with all the answers. And there was none. It's very unfortunate. . . a real tragedy.



STEVE PREFONTAINE
... Aftermath

And I can understand the concern of the family."

Rumors continue to drift through Eugene, Prefontaine's hometown of Coos Bay and wherever friends gather to discuss the incident. There are whispers of a second car being involved. Some people think 'Pre' was forced off the road. They refuse to accept investigating officer Rex Ballinger's findings that Pre was alone on the sharply bending road.

"It was a one-car accident," Ballinger told the Mercury-News. "It couldn't have happened any other way. He was driving down the road, with no seat belt on. His sports car jumped a curb, hit a rock embankment and flipped over. He was pinned under the windshield. He probably died instantly, the way the windshield came down on his chest.

"I see no reason for any rumors to continue."

But Lane County Dist. Atty. Pat Horton indicated his department is still looking into the case.

"The police conducted an extensive investigation," he said. "It provided us with our information. A citizen has asked us to investigate farther. We are looking into it. It's difficult, though, because some of the principals involved are out of town. We can't do more until they return."

Theories on Accidents

Horton said several theories have been advanced on how the accident happened. "But they are only theories at this point."

However, it is known Horton had a deputy drive 100 miles last week to re-check out Pre's car in Junction City. It had been towed there to be resold. The family doesn't want it around Eugene.

Cliff Shirley, with whom the runner had lived for 18 months, is very close to the Prefontaines. A Eugene businessman, he confirmed the family desires to pursue the case.

"We are only seeking the truth," he said. "There is no way the accident could have happened as it was portrayed.

"Well, there is one way—if Pre had committed suicide. But anyone who knew Pre wouldn't ever believe that. He was a super-straight kid, with too much going for him. In fact, he was about to open a restaurant called "The Sub-Four" in an old depot on Willamette street. He was looking to the Olympics and, oh, a hundred other things."

Why Was Test Released?

What irritates Pre's friends and family the most was release of the blood alcohol test showing a .16 of one per cent level. In Oregon, .10 is considered legally intoxicated.

Chief Allen said "there was no reason to withhold intoxicated."

"Sure, Pre had had seven or eight beers over an hour or so," declared Shirley, "but he was in superb condition. Distance runners traditionally have a few beers after a big race. People who saw him leave the post-race party agreed he was all right. He certainly wasn't acting drunk. . . what I'd like explained are those 41 feet of skid, or scuff, marks found on the street after the crash. Why did Pre try to stop?"

And, through the evergreens of the Willamette Valley and the lumber stacks of Coos Bay, the whispers go on.

Memorial fund for Prefontaine

PORTLAND, Ore. (UPI) — Plans for creation of the Steve Prefontaine Foundation to aid track and field athletes after they finish college were announced Friday.

One of the leaders in creating the foundation, marathon runner Kenny Moore, Eugene, Ore., said the foundation would do something the Amateur Athletic Union "should have been doing for years but hasn't."

Moore and Bill Bowerman, Prefontaine's coach at the University of Oregon, are leading the drive to establish the non-profit foundation. Prefontaine, America's top distance runner, was killed in an auto accident in Eugene earlier this year.

Moore said the proposed foundation would promote international class track meets and athletic exchanges and would conduct clinics and provide medical and legal services. The foundation proposes to aid both men and women athletes, Moore said.

"The opportunity for good lies not in the college area, but in advancing the careers after the athlete is out of college. It is something the AAU should have been doing for years but hasn't," he said.

"There is no question that the AAU would feel threatened but we would not be making the athletes professional and we would not be picking national teams; so we are on solid legal ground."

He said the foundation could serve as a stimulus for a similar program nationally.

A fund drive is planned to acquire initial funds for the foundation's endowment with operating funds expected to be acquired

later through gate receipts from foundation-sponsored meets and payment for televising the competition, Moore said.

The foundation will operate, at least initially, in Oregon only.