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Charles Alexander <charlesa1105@gmail.com>
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Prefontaine, Lindgren and the greatest U.S. cross country race ever

Friday's Pac-12 cross country championship is the final chapter in the story of how the conference changed the sport

 Gerry Lindgren, right, beat Steve Prefontaine at the Pac-8 Conference Cross Country Championships at Stanford University on November 15, 1969. (Photo by Gary Lineburg)

Gerry Lindgren, right, beat Steve Prefontaine at the Pac-8 Conference Cross Country Championships at Stanford University on November 15, 1969. (Photo by Gary Lineburg)

By SCOTT M. REID | sreid@scng.com | Orange County Register

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As Washington State's Gerry Lindgren started up a long, steep hill less than two miles into the 1969 Pac-8 cross country championships on the Stanford Golf Course he was where he had always seemed to be on the road, on the track, in life.

All alone.

He was full of run and confidence. The injuries and ulcer that had hounded him for the past 18 months were behind him. So here he was in the inaugural conference championships attacking the first in a series of climbs, the runner who had captured global attention for the second half of the 1960s, a grown up version of the scrawny teenager from Spokane who had upset the Soviets at the Coliseum in 1964, the world record-holder, already the winner of a record 10 NCAA titles, Gerry Lindgren, American distance running's king of the freaking hill once again flying solo.

"When I ran cross country I would always take off like mad and get a big lead and then I could just coast and do whatever I wanted because it was over already," Lindgren said in a telephone interview earlier this month. "So the first mile of the race I remember taking off like mad, being all by myself and going up this long hill and then I get almost to the top of the hill and then that damn Pre sprints by me. I can't believe it. Nobody's ever been there."

Over the remaining miles of the 6-mile race Lindgren and Oregon freshman Steve Prefontaine would take themselves and the sport, the conference to places they had never been before, repeatedly attacking each other mile after mile, hill after hill, with a series of relentless bursts, both courageous and reckless, testimonies to their pride as much as their talent, until they crossed the finish line totally spent, literally shoulder to shoulder, colliding in combat and exhaustion in what remains the greatest cross country race ever held on American soil.

Lindgren and Prefontaine were so inseparable in the end, E. Garry Hill, the longtime editor of Track & Field News, recalled that it took "forever to adjudicate the finish picture."

Eventually Lindgren was declared the winner although the outcome remains the source of debate in running circles more than a half-century later.

What remains clear is the epic nature of Lindgren and Prefontaine's battle and the transformative impact the race had on

college cross country and American distance running.

Hill covered 11 Olympic Games and 15 World Championships for Track & Field News, the self-proclaimed Bible of the sport. But in 1969 he was a former Washington State triple jumper who happened to be in the Bay Area interviewing for a statistician job with the Los Altos-based magazine.

“From the vantage point of today,” Hill said of the 1969 Pac-8 race “it remains in a three-way tie with a pair of Olympic races” as the greatest footrace he has ever witnessed.

The other two?

The 2000 Olympic Games 10,000-meter final in which Ethiopia Haile Gebrselassie, the defending Olympic champion and world record holder, came from behind in the closing meters to edge Kenya’s Paul Tergat, winner of five consecutive World cross country titles, by nine-hundredths of a second for the gold medal, and the 2004 Olympic 1,500 final in which Kenya’s Bernard Lagat pulled ahead of Morocco’s world record-shattering Hicham El Guerrouj halfway down the final homestretch only to have El Guerrouj to fight back to claim by twelve-hundredths the one major title that had previously eluded him.

End of a Pac-12 tradition

The Prefontaine-Lindgren showdown was the opening act of an unprecedented more than half-century run by the conference that comes to a close with the breakup of the Pac-12 and the final conference cross country championship Friday morning near Tacoma.

“The Conference of Champions is no more,” Meb Keflezighi, a Pac-10 and NCAA cross country champion at UCLA and the 2004 Olympic marathon silver medalist. “It’s hard to imagine.”

“The history that has been written with all those great athletes and those great teams and coaches to a certain degree will be lost because when you had the conference meet every year it brings back those memories to everybody and now that’s gone,” said longtime UCLA coach Bob Larsen. “Or will be gone.”

The 1969 race would awaken a sleeping giant who would in turn provide a wake-up call for the rest of the nation, forever changing the autumn landscape, shifting the sport’s balance of power to the Pac-8 and later the Pac-10 and Pac-12 from the East Coast and Midwest, and in the process pushing American distance running to new heights.

“That Pac-8 in ’69 opened a few eyes to ‘hey, there’s some great runners out there and let’s get them all to nationals and see who can win,’” said Don Kardong, who ran for host Stanford in the 1969 race and later finished fourth in the 1976 Olympic marathon.

And for most of the next decade, the winners wore the iconic lemon yellow with green lettering singlet of Oregon or the maroon and silver of Washington State. Conference teams and runners would dominate college cross country for the next decade and beyond.

Pac-8/Pac-10 runners won eight of the next 11 NCAA individual titles, Lindgren in his final collegiate race, winning his third national cross country title, his 11th NCAA championship overall, 10 days after his duel with Prefontaine. Prefontaine and Washington State’s Henry Rono by the end of the coming decade had also joined Lindgren as the then only three-time NCAA champions. Oregon’s Edward Cheserek became only the fourth man to claim three NCAA titles, winning the 2013, 2014 and 2015 races. Stanford’s Charlie Hick’s victory last November clinched the 22nd NCAA title by a conference runner.

Pac-12 schools have won 12 NCAA men’s team titles.

“We were able to up the ante a little bit,” Lindgren said. “You had to run better in cross country to win than you ever had to before.

“It changed everything.”

How Bill Dellinger changed the sport

But perhaps the most transformative figure in the conference’s rise to national supremacy was Oregon coach Bill Dellinger.

The recent reflection on the conference’s history has shown a fresh light on a man who for too long was cast in the shadow of his mentor, iconic Oregon coach Bill Bowerman, the co-founder of Nike.

"He had immense influence on distance running in general and highlighting cross country and making it a more high profile sport in the United States especially on the West Coast," Larsen said of Dellinger.

"He was a game-changer," said Pat Tyson, Prefontaine's Oregon teammate and roommate who has built his own national caliber program at Gonzaga. Dellinger was Oregon's first great distance runner under Bowerman. Dellinger was a three-time Olympian, claiming a bronze medal at 5,000 meters in the 1964 Olympic Games. By 1968 he had returned to his alma mater to work as an assistant to Bowerman.

Between 1954 and 1962, Oregon runners won six NCAA mile or 1,500-meter titles. But Bowerman was not motivated to chase similar success through the autumn. Oregon had never sent a team to the NCAA cross country meet until 1962, a year after Oregon State won the national individual and team titles. Oregon finished second at NCAAs in 1963 and 1964. But in 1965 the NCAA increased the race distance from 4 to 6 miles and the Ducks finished a disappointing eighth place. Oregon wouldn't send another team to NCAAs until Dellinger took over the cross country program in 1969.

"Bill Bowerman was not a fan of cross country, going to the nationals. It was rarely something he wanted to do," Tyson said. "He wanted to use all fall as base training for outdoor track. But now that Bill Dellinger was in command and they had Pre. ... Bill Bowerman gave the leash to Bill Dellinger to go with cross more at the national level."

Dellinger guided Oregon to NCAA titles in 1971, 1973 and 1974. In the mid-70s he raised the stakes further by recruiting nationally to counter the pipeline of older Kenyan runners at Washington State, attracting schoolboy superstars like Rudy Chapa (Indiana) and Alberto Salazar (Massachusetts) and Manhattan transfer Matt Centrowitz to Eugene.

"Dellinger realized if you're going to stay competitive you can't just get guys that are 4:15 (mile) guys down the road and win against world-class competition," said Rick Riley, a Pac-8 mile champion for Washington State and teammate of Lindgren's on the 1969 team. "The game was really changing as far as high school times getting better and better and you had to reach out and look for talent. Oregon got Salazar, Rudy Chapa, all these guys. If you were going to win, that's what you had to do. Plus in the scheme of things Dellinger upped the ante a bit of Bowerman's training philosophy of alternating hard, easy days.

"There were more miles and the harder was harder and the easier was harder."

Said Tyson "There was cross country before Dellinger but Dellinger was the first guy who made it honest. If we're going to compete then we're going to have to recruit. You bring Rudy in, you bring in Alberto and it just exploded."

Jaw-dropping times

With a core group of runners that won the 1977 NCAA title and finished second to UTEP teams made up of predominantly older African runners in 1978 and 1979, Dellinger put together the greatest squad of North American college runners ever. Five members of the 1977 Oregon squad made Olympic teams and that doesn't include Chapa, an NCAA champion at 5,000 meters and the American record-holder in the 3,000, who was hampered by injury in the Olympic year of 1980. Four of the first seven U.S. men under 13 minutes, 20 seconds for 5,000 were on that 1977 Ducks team.

"It would be hard to argue anything better honestly," Washington coach Andy Powell said of the Oregon group. "That was next level. I think that has got to be the best" North American group.

That Oregon team had to run jaw-dropping times just to keep pace with rival Washington State.

In the early 70s, WSU coach John Chaplin opened up a pipeline of Kenyan runners.

"That changed the dynamic a lot," Riley said. "That changed the whole character of the sport. Henry Rono was from another planet. I mean he did crazy stuff."

In the space of 80 days in 1978, Rono set world records at 3,000, 5,000 and 10,000 meters as well at the 3,000 steeplechase. The previous world record-holder at 10,000 was his teammate and countryman Samson Kimombwa, runner-up to Rono in the 1976 NCAA cross country race. Rono repeated in 1977. Salazar won the 1978 NCAA race and then finished second to Rono in 1979.

Until 1983 the conference held Pac-12 Northern Division and Southern Division races two weeks before the league meet.

"Just to be good at the Northern Division meet you had to be world class," Chapa said. "If you wanted to finish in the top four, top five, you had to beat a couple of world record holders.

"My position always was and it was Alberto's position also was that (the Kenyans) made us better. You could not be a top three finisher in the the Northern Division cross country or the Pac-8 or Pac-10 meet unless you were world class. So they actually hastened our development to the point where by the time we were sophomores or juniors we were considered

world class. The competition required that you had to be that good. And so I looked at it as a real benefit.”

But the optics of Oregon’s homegrown North American squad versus Washington State’s older, already established runners further fueled the sport’s most intense rivalry.

Chapa and Salazar made their college debuts against Rono in the 1976 Pac-8 Northern Division race at Seattle’s Green Lake.

“I remember that race very well. That was my first college race and we had all heard about Washington State and the Kenyans,” Chapa said. “First college cross country event ever and at the start of the race (Oregon’s) Terry Williams and Josh Kimeto (a two-time NCAA 5,000 champion for Washington State) got into it and they actually started fighting and the race started.

“That’s what I remember the most. It took already what was a tense situation being the first race and I knew I wasn’t in Kansas anymore. This was big time, this was not an Indiana high school cross country meet.

“Terry had certain issues ... they were international athletes. Terry was a very vocal kind of guy and Kimeto took offense to it. And literally started pushing each other at the starting line.”

It wasn’t until Larsen’s UCLA squad won the 1980 Pac-10 race led by individual winner Ron Cornell that the individual or team conference champion didn’t come from Oregon or Washington State.

“It was a golden age, it truly was,” Riley said.

There would be other golden teams.

UCLA head track coach Jim Bush was so upset with the Bruins fifth-place finish in the 1969 Pac-8 meet that he vowed to never recruit another distance runner.

Over time Bush reconsidered but only slightly. Larsen and UCLA defended their conference title with just two scholarships.

Stanford All-American Greg Brock recalled a discussion he had with teammate Brook Thomas after the inaugural Pac-8 meet.

“Stanford could be really good in cross country,” Brock recalled Thomas saying. “And it took a guy from the East Coast to figure that out.”

Vin Lannana, a graduate of C.W. Post, coached Stanford to NCAA men’s titles in 1996, 2002 and 2003. Lannana and Powell, a middle distance standout at Stanford, guided Oregon to national titles in 2007 and 2008, the latter team featuring two-time Olympic medalist Galen Rupp and future Olympic 1,500 champion Matthew Centrowitz. Colorado won national titles in 2013 and 2014. In the 2014 race, Oregon’s Cheserek and Eric Jenkins went 1-2 and six of the top nine finishers were from the Pac-12.

“When you’ve got six of the top nine,” Powell said. “When you have a good school like Stanford, and Oregon and Colorado that was as dominating as it gets.”

The greatest cross country race

Prefontaine remains the most dominant distance runner in American history. He was the first athlete to win four NCAA outdoor track titles in the same event (3 mile/5,000). At the time of his death in May 1975, killed in a car accident, he held all seven American records at distances between 2,000 and 10,000 meters.

Nearly a half-century after his death, Prefontaine is still perhaps American track’s most transcendent superstar, the subject of two Hollywood feature films and countless marketing campaigns by Nike, the Oregon company he made world famous.

The 1969 Pac-8 race signaled Prefontaine’s arrival.

“It was the transition from when Lindgren was dominant as the best distance runner in the country and then Pre was taking over and they ended up essentially tying after battling each other all the way through,” Kardong said. “It was quite a spectacular race, an amazing battle between the two superstars.”

Lindgren was an unlikely superstar.

He was small with a squeaky voice, no match for his distant, sometimes violent father Myrl.

"My father rejected me because I was weak," Lindgren later told Sports Illustrated's Kenny Moore, a college rival at Oregon. "He was the tough drinker. I couldn't be his son."

The problem was that Lindgren grew to view himself the same way his father did.

"I never did have the confidence in myself," Lindgren said in a Runner's World interview. "I would always look at myself in the mirror, I would see that same wimpy kid that I hated as a child."

So Lindgren ran, trying to put as much distance as he could be between his father, the broken home, the wimpy kid in the mirror.

"Running was the escape," Riley said. "That's what filled the hole in Gerry.

"Running was the vehicle for his self esteem and his escape from a terrible home life."

He would claim to run as much as 50 miles in a day, 200 miles a week.

Or was it 300?

"He was just such an interesting guy," said Kardong, who moved to Spokane after graduating from Stanford. "It was hard to tell when he was being serious and when he was just kind of clowning around because he had that antic way of approaching life. So he would tell stories that couldn't possibly be true. Or he would tell you he had done things, 'Well, you didn't do that Gerry.' It was just hard to figure him out. And yet he was such a spectacular runner.

"(People would say) 'Oh, yeah, used to see him run by three times a day.' It might have been true. It was a lot. More than anybody else was doing. If Gerry told you he ran X number of miles, I wouldn't believe him."

No matter how far, how fast he ran Lindgren could not shake his demons.

He spent 10 days in jail in Pierce County, Washington in 1978 for failing to pay child support after losing a 1976 paternity suit filed in Ventura County. In 1980 he vanished, leaving behind a wife, three young children, and a financially troubled running store in Tacoma. He remained under the radar until Moore tracked him down in Hawaii in 1987.

"His friends would basically say Gerry was damaged goods," Riley said. "But there was never a kinder, more generous guy in the world for someone who had so little.

"I roomed with him my freshman year, I hardly ever saw him. He was very much a loner. A very different personality. I always said his problems later in life you had to separate his running from his personal life. "

Lindgren first emerged on the national scene just days before Christmas 1963. Competing against an all-star high school field in an indoor meet at the Cow Palace near San Francisco, Lindgren, a 17-year-old senior at Spokane's John Rogers High School, shattered the national prep indoor 2-mile record by 21.9 seconds, clocking in at 9 minutes, 00.0 seconds and lapping the entire seven-runner field during 22-lap race including future world mile and 1,500-meter record holder Jim Ryun, who finished 22 seconds behind Lindgren.

A few weeks later Lindgren was back at the Cow Palace to take on Australia's Ron Clarke, a world record-holder at multiple distances, in an open race.

"He was so little he couldn't have looked more than 13 years old," Clarke said later.

But the kid, all 5-feet-6, 118 pounds, was already world class, pushing Clarke all the way to the finish before finishing second but lowering his own indoor national high school record to 8:40.0, a record that stood stand for 49 years until Cheserek, running for New Jersey's St. Benedict Prep, was clocked in 8:39.15.

That summer Lindgren set a national high school record at 5,000 meters (13:44.0) that stood for 40 years until finally broken by Rupp (13:37.91), then stunned a crowd of 50,519 including U.S. attorney general Robert F. Kennedy at the Coliseum by winning the 10,000 in the U.S.-Soviet Union by nearly a 150 meters in 93-degree heat. It was the first time an American had won the event in the U.S.-Soviet series. Kennedy, it was reported, was moved to tears by Lindgren's victory.

"I still think it's too bad that they didn't do a big documentary or a movie of Lindgren's coming up through high school and winning the Russia-America meet," Kardog said. "Because that was an unbelievable performance. Just totally out of the blue. It was one of those things that kind of ignited the distance running scene in the United States."

Lindgren went on to win the Olympic Trials 10,000 on that same Coliseum track.

“He knocked the world on its ear with his indoor times and then when he beat the Russians,” Riley said. “And then there was a thought that he might pick up a medal or even win the Olympics” in Tokyo later that year.

Instead, battling illness and a sprained ankle, Lindgren finished ninth in an Olympic 10,000 won by another American, unknown Billy Mills, in one of the biggest upsets in the Games’ history.

“When I was in high school, I wanted to go to Oregon and everybody wanted to go to Oregon,” Lindgren said. “But Bowerman wanted nothing to do with me.”

Bowerman and Washington State coach Jack Mooberry were good friends.

“And there was pretty much a gentlemen’s agreement between Jack Mooberry and Bill Bowerman that they kind of left each other’s guys alone (in recruiting),” Riley said.

So Lindgren headed 75 miles south on U.S.-195 to Pullman and Washington State. Freshmen were ineligible to compete in college competition under NCAA rules at the time. But the NCAA, engaged in a turf war at the time with the Amateur Athletic Union, then track’s national governing body, also prohibited college athletes from competing in the U.S. Championships. Lindgren, ignoring an NCAA vow to strip him of his college eligibility and dozens of death threats, defied the ban. He lost to Mills in the 1965 U.S. Championships 6-mile by a margin so small that both men were credited with the world record (27:11.6).

A year later he just missed breaking Clarke’s 3-mile world record, running 12:53.0 in the wind and rain on a muddy track in a nearly empty Husky Stadium in Seattle. His 11 NCAA titles were the most ever by a track and cross country athlete, eclipsing Jesse Owens’ eight national crowns, the previous record. He won the 1966 and 1967 NCAA cross country titles and then redshirted during the 1968 season to focus on the Olympic Trials that fall.

“I don’t think people appreciated the world-class running that Gerry did,” Riley said. “I don’t think people appreciate, A) he won 11 NCAA titles. The only one he lost was when Ryun outkicked him indoors (in the NCAA Championships 2-mile). He could not run as a freshman. There’s another three (NCAA titles) at least. The 12:53 was unbelievable, he just missed the world record, running in the vast empty, windy, crappy track at Washington. He just was the guy who did not have the personality that engaged people like Steve Prefontaine.”

“He did not engage the public or excite the public like Pre.”

There was a buzz surrounding Prefontaine even before he landed on the Oregon campus in the fall of 1969.

Stanford’s Brock recalled cooling down with Oregon runners after beating them in the 3-mile in a 1968 dual meet in Palo Alto .

“All the Oregon guys could talk about was this kid Prefontaine,” Brock said.

Two Oregon runners, Arne Kvalheim and Roscoe Divine, joined Dellinger on a recruiting trip to Prefontaine’s hometown of Coos Bay on the Oregon Coast. Kvalheim had just set the collegiate 2-mile record. Divine was a world-class miler. But on a run on the beach, Prefontaine charged ahead of the two Ducks stars.

“Am I going too fast for you?” Prefontaine asked looking back at the pair. “I’ll slow the pace down. Can you keep up with me?”

Riley encountered that same confidence when he called Prefontaine in the spring of 1969 to make a recruiting pitch for Washington State. Three years earlier, Riley, running for Spokane’s Ferris High School, set the national high school outdoor 2-mile record (8:48.4).

“He was a little full of himself,” Riley said recalling the phone conversation. “Very confident, very confident and I appreciated that. He didn’t mince any words about what his goals were and what he wanted to do and what he thought he could do.”

Before hanging up, Prefontaine told Riley “I’m going to break your national high school record.”

“I remember thinking this kid is a confident kid, man,” Riley continued. “But most of the time he could deliver.”

True to his word, Prefontaine ran 8:41.5 in April 1969 to break Riley’s record. That July Prefontaine raced Lindgren in a 2-mile race in Honolulu, the WSU star winning 8:45.6 to 8:48.8.

They would meet four months later in Prefontaine's collegiate debut at the Pac-8 Northern Division Championships in Corvallis.

The rain-drenched, leaf-covered 6-mile course at Avery Park was a soggy, sloppy mess. The course had several stretches of pavement so WSU coach Mooberry instructed his runners to wear racing flats. Prefontaine wore adidas spikes.

"Pre was a teenager, 18 years old still but fearless," Tyson said. "Total 100 percent confidence, but total respect. I wouldn't say Pre worshipped Lindgren but massively respected him."

The Oregon freshman led early only to have Lindgren build a 60-meter lead in the second and third miles. But then the course hit a treacherous stretch and with Lindgren, already nursing a sore ankle, slipping and sliding, Prefontaine pulled away for a 29:13.8 to 29:41 victory.

Two weeks later they met again at the Pac-8 meet at Stanford.

"Lindgren wouldn't say much," Riley said referring to the Northern Division race. "He wouldn't say I'm going to kick Pre's ass next time. He just withdrew into himself. He did not like to lose. He was not demonstrative when he won. He's a pretty humble guy. But you knew with Gerry that week, if Pre was going to beat him this time it was going to be a bloodletting. It was going to be one hell of a race, because Lindgren was that kind of guy.

"He didn't exude confidence like Pre. He didn't talk about himself like Pre, but you knew that during the week, you knew that he pushed his foot a little harder on the acceleration during training. He pushed the pace a little bit more. We ran our harder stuff a little harder. You basically knew as his teammate that he was going to go after it.

"You knew something special was coming."

Prefontaine and Lindgren covered the first mile in 4:23 reducing the rest of the field to spectators.

"Just crazy pace," said Kardong, who finished 14th that day. "Each of them was trying to put the other one away right from the gun."

Riley, Brock and Oregon's Steve Savage, later a 1972 Olympian in the 3,000-meter steeplechase, led the rest of the field.

"I was in the chase pack at 4:29," Brock said. "My fastest ever through the mile on that course was 4:40. I thought, 'Oh, boy, I just have to hang in for dear life.'"

As Lindgren started up the first hill he thought he had dropped Prefontaine.

But "all of a sudden I got up to that hill and I wasn't ahead of everybody and that was something new to me," Lindgren said. "That was something new to me. I was out of my element.

"So I had to hustle up to the top of the hill and then back down again and I got ahead of Pre and Pre's fighting me off and I'm thinking my goodness this has never happened to me in cross country.

"And he kept me out of my element the whole race. Not once would he let me go. The whole race we were neck and neck. I'd go by him and try to get a little bit of a lead and he just wouldn't let me have it."

At one point the course took a U-turn.

"And you could glance across and see Lindgren and Prefontaine and it was epic," Brock recalled. "They were shoulder to shoulder. They were so close together they bounced off each other a few times. You knew you were watching greatness."

On they attacked.

"He kept me out of my element the whole race," Lindgren said. "Not once would he let me go. And I sprinted several times as hard as I could go just to get away from him and boy did he fight back. The most I ever got away was three steps."

Said Riley, "Lindgren and Pre were out front just hammering on each other."

At the top of a final hill, Prefontaine led.

"Went up that last hill, he was a good step ahead of me and I thought it's all over because he'll just take off and then he didn't," Lindgren said. "He was tired. I was tired."

Said Riley “when you got into a race and the chips were down, I would always bet on Lindgren. I don’t care who he was running against, I’d bet on Lindgren.”

So they battled on into the final 400 meters, through a gauntlet of screaming fans, neither giving an inch. In the closing meters they collided, their shoulders and elbows crashing into each other.

“My indelible memory is of the two of them in lockstep coming down the long finishing straight at the Stanford golf course,” Hill said. “And them leaning into each other in the closing strides.”

They crossed the finish line leaning into each, still inseparable, forever bonded together by a race for the ages. After a delay that seemed almost as long as the race, officials finally awarded Lindgren the victory. They were given the same time, 28:32.4 which shattered the course record by 74 seconds. Oregon’s Savage outkicked Riley for third (28:58.4 to 29:02.0) with Brock fifth (29:08.0).

“He was strong, using his arms to push me into the crowd on the left side,” Lindgren said. “Because he was using his strength that way instead of going toward the finish line I was able to get my nose to the finish line just before his did.

“It was that close.

“It was my toughest cross country race for sure. It was a real wake-up for me. Because I had never been challenged when I was feeling good and all of sudden this little guy is challenging me.”

Lindgren would go on to win his third NCAA cross country title at New York’s Van Cortlandt Park.

“I was scared, really scared,” Lindgren later told Prefontaine biographer Tom Jordan. “So I wanted to lead the whole way.”

Prefontaine, still feeling the effects of the Pac-8 race, was third. He would never lose a cross country race again.

He took the 1970 NCAA race and thought he had led the Ducks to their first team title as well. “We had the (first place) trophy with us on the plane home,” Tyson said. But after a protest, a controversial review of the finish resulted in Villanova being awarded a belated victory.

“To this day, to this day, everybody would say Oregon got robbed,” Tyson said.

Prefontaine repeated in 1971 in a race he almost didn’t run. After Oregon finished second to WSU in the Pac-8 race Ducks athletic director Norv Ritchey decided to only send Prefontaine not the team to the NCAA meet in Knoxville.”Pre said if the team isn’t going, I’m not going,” Tyson recalled.

Ritchey gave in and Oregon won its first national title.

Bowerman, still dismissive of cross country, didn’t make the trip to Tennessee. A week after their victory the university took a photo of the national champions.

“It wasn’t a big deal and then we started winning trophies and it was a big deal,” Tyson said. “Bowerman actually popped in the photo of the NCAA championship team.”



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