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## AMERICA'S DISTANCE PRODIGY

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Freshman Steve Prefontaine

AU570 888 88797495X59 40 42  
KENNEDY SCHOOL  
GOODWIN AV -CONN DR  
REDWOOD CTY CA 94061

# THE FRESHMAN AND THE GREAT GURU

Only 19 but blessed with speed, stamina and a canny coach, Steve Prefontaine may turn out to be the best ever **by PAT PUTNAM**

The mile run wouldn't start until 8:30 p.m., or not for another three hours, which meant, of course, that it was time for the good people of Eugene, Ore. to start gathering at the track. They filed by the thousands into the two creaking old wooden stands that flank the University of Oregon's new yellow \$125,000 jewel of a track, and while they waited they ate their dinners from picnic baskets and talked of the university's ex-

tensive list of sub-four-minute milers, eight in all, and they became excited with the prospect that the list surely would be increased before night fell across the fir forests. In Eugene, babies are teched on stopwatches, 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, each perhaps pretending for a moment that he is one of Bill Bowerman's track stars, say a Steve Prefontaine. Ah, Prefontaine! 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.

To a track fan, little can match the excitement of a sub-four-minute mile, and last Friday, Bowerman, the great guru of track coaches, had come down from his mountain, gathered together his peerless racers and made ready to give Eugene several memorable minutes. It was only an intrasquad meet, but at Oregon they get more first-rate distance runners by accident than most schools get by frantic recruiting. Once a year Bowerman pits his current stars against those of the immediate past, and they go at each other with a deadly purpose. There are 10 events and the fans—more than 9,000 last Friday—are on their feet applauding for them all, but the other nine are only frosting. The mile is the cake.

The true milers, of course, are favored, and this year that meant people like Roscoe Divine, a handsome senior with a career best of 3:57.2, and Dave Wilborn, an alumnus who holds the school record of 3:56.2. This meant that Prefontaine, who can run with anybody for two miles or three, would surely be outclassed. His best in the mile was 4:00.4, highly creditable for a 19-year-old middle-distance runner but hardly world class.

"Out of his league?" said Bowerman, amused at the thought that the confident kid from Coos Bay, Ore. could be outclassed in any race. "We'll see."

This school year, Prefontaine has 1) beaten Gerry Lindgren, his idol, by 27 seconds in a six-mile cross-country race; 2) run two miles in 8:40.0, the third-fastest time in the U.S. this year; 3) run three miles in 13:12.8, the fastest in the world this year; 4) run six miles in practice in 28:20, presumably the fastest in the U.S. this year. Although well above world and American records, these times are exceptional for a 19-year-old.

"The kid is just plain amazing," says Bill Dellinger, Bowerman's young and very capable assistant. Dellinger knows of what he speaks. One of Oregon's army of ex-NCAA champions, he was on three Olympic teams, winning a bronze medal in the 5,000 in 1964, and he once held indoor world records in the two mile and three mile. "Usually it takes guys in our events 12 years to build confidence in themselves," he says, "the confidence you need to win, and here's a young man who has the right attitude naturally. He wouldn't be afraid to stand on the line against anybody in the world in the three mile. I remember when I went to the Olympics for the first time in 1956. I was so scared there was no way I could have won. When I stepped up I *knew* I was outclassed. In 1960 it was a little better, but I was sick so it didn't matter. But in 1964 I was a lot older, a lot more experienced and I knew I could do well. So I did well. But Prefontaine, he's as tough mentally right now as world-class runners who are 10 years older. If the competition is tough or the wind is blowing like crazy or it's awfully hot, hell, that's not going to stop him. There's nothing in running that he doesn't believe he can do."

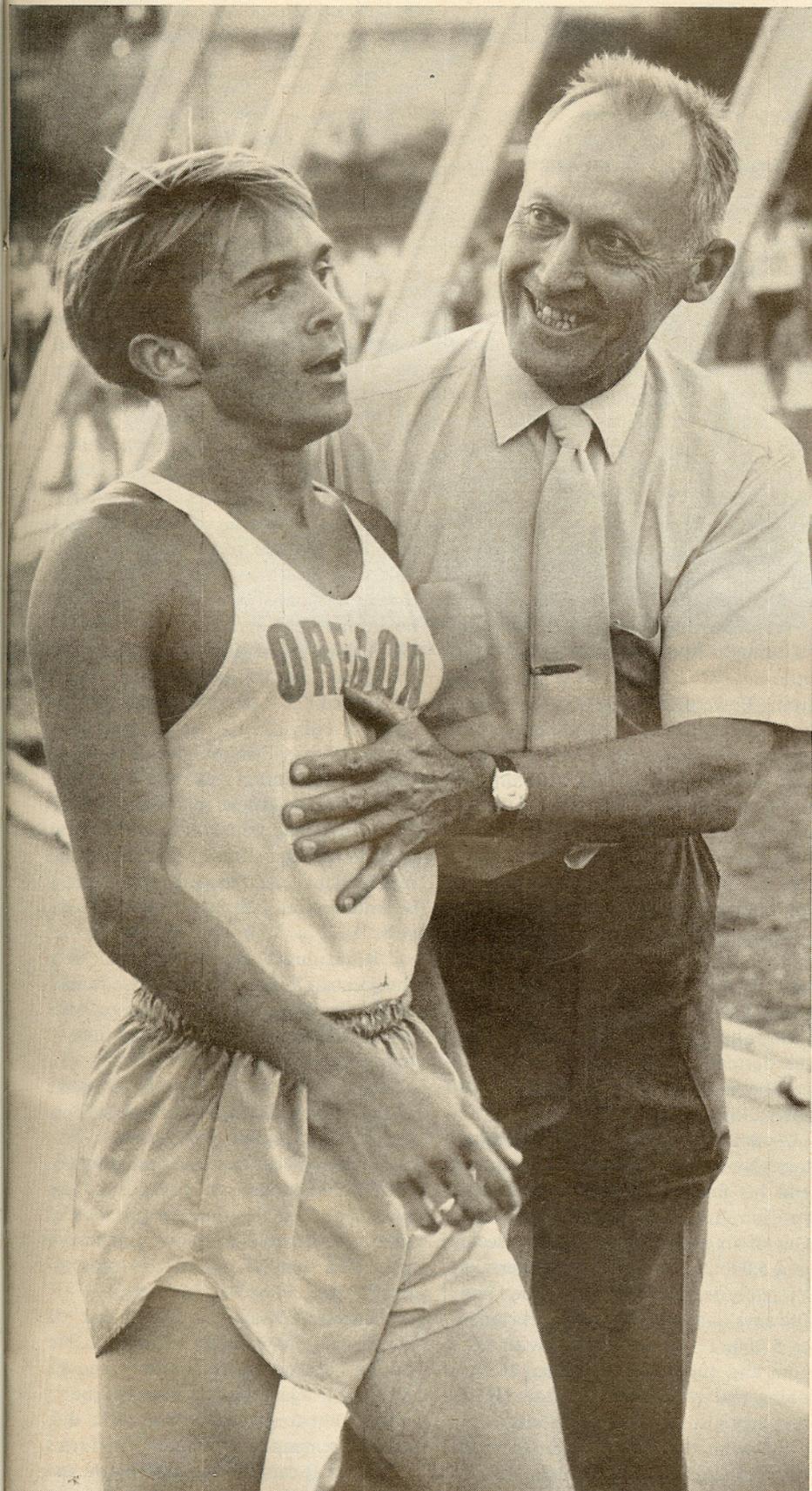
Fine, but there are hundreds of young runners around the world who don't want to lose. But they do. And so?

Dellinger grins. "Our young man," he says, "is blessed with a cardiovascular system that is so superior to the average human that it is almost unbelievable."

Prefontaine, named at birth Steve Roland but call him Pre, is the only son of a hardworking middle-class Oregon family—his father Raymond is a carpenter; his mother Elfriede, a German



PREFONTAINE LED MIDWAY THROUGH MILE



BOWERMAN CONGRATULATES 19-YEAR-OLD PREFONTAINE FOLLOWING HIS 3:57.4 MILE

war bride, is a seamstress—who held its breath when, at something less than five feet and 100 pounds, he turned out for football and basketball in the eighth grade. (He grew to 5'9" and 145 pounds.) But he survived, mostly because he seldom was allowed to roam from the bench. He was too light for the gridiron, too short for the basketball court. "But I knew there had to be something for me," he remembers. "Coos Bay is a sports-minded town. You had to be an athlete to be somebody. I knew I had to show everybody that I could excel at something. But I didn't know what."

It was right after the basketball season that he found his something. It was in a physical-education class. Everyone was required to run a mile a day. The second week Prefontaine finished second. He discovered he loved to run. Better yet, he discovered that when he ran he usually was better than anyone in his class. The next year, the high-school coach, Walt McClure, who had run the 440 and 880 at Oregon, asked him to join the varsity cross-country team. When the season ended, he was No. 2 man—as a freshman. Then it was track, with, at age 15, bests of 5:00 in the mile, 10:08 in the two mile. Everywhere he went, he went running. It is said in Coos Bay that no one has seen Pre at anything slower than a trot since 1966.

As a sophomore he ran the mile in 4:32, two miles in 9:42.5—and failed to qualify for the state meet. "I was really bitter," says Prefontaine. "Really angry with myself. I was sick. Then McClure talked to me. Whenever I got down he was always there to pick me up. I decided that if I was going to continue in track, that I didn't want to lose, that I wasn't *going* to lose. All summer all I thought about was coming back. I flogged myself in practice. All I did was run. On the beach. In the hills."

His junior year began, and even in workouts he refused to let anyone finish ahead of him. Every race was the same. Prefontaine would take the lead and never give it up. He didn't lose a race that year. "I found a world where I belonged," he says. "But every once in a while I think what am I doing out here running, busting myself up? Life could be so much easier. The other guys are out having fun, doing other things, why not me? Now I'm in college and

*continued*

the latest I've ever stayed out is midnight. Midnight. Heck, campus life starts after midnight, and me, I've been asleep for three hours. But it's helped me in my studies. I've disciplined myself to do things that I don't want to do."

His senior year in high school, Pre ran two miles in 8:41.6, then and now a record. Forty colleges were after him. "It was terrible," he recalls. "Mail, phone calls at all hours, people showing up at the door. It got so bad I really began to wish I had never set the record. I referred all the calls to my coach, and he usually told the caller to leave me alone. He wanted me to go to Oregon."

But Prefontaine wasn't sure that Oregon wanted him. Where is Mr. Bowerman, he wondered. Bowerman, of course, was at home sitting on top of his mountain just outside of Eugene, and waiting for Prefontaine to come to him. Bowerman recruits no one, at least not in the usual sense of the word. He considers it immoral. Nonetheless, in his 22 years at Oregon, he has won three national championships and finished second or third three times. In 12 of the last 17 years Oregon has finished in the top 10 at the NCAAs, and until two years ago Oregon never gave a full four-year scholarship in track. Bowerman wasn't happy when the school decided it would.

"Oh, I recruit," he says, "but I don't go out and make love to some kid. We're not in the business of making deals with a kid. We are offering him a chance for a good college education, and if I'm talking to a kid who has a chance for a better education someplace else, I tell him to go."

Which is something that has not endeared Bill Bowerman to the most fanatic of Oregon track fans, although the first one has yet dared to voice an objection to his face. Bowerman is 59, but he is tall and rawboned and in dandy shape, and when he sets forth his principles, don't make light of them. He was a major with the 10th Mountain Division during World War II, an outfit that fought and skied across Italy and took every objective it went after. In the late '40s, shortly after he became track coach at Oregon, Bowerman bought 70 acres on top of a mountain and built a home—156 feet straight up from the winding McKenzie River and with a breathtaking view across the Willamette Valley to the Cascade Mountains which rise 70 miles

to the southeast. Prefontaine often runs on the hillside in front of Bowerman's house (*see cover*).

At the bottom of his mountain, Bowerman put up a mailbox, which soon became the target of a rock truck driver. Finally, Bowerman went to him and asked him to please stop running over the mailbox. The driver ignored him. O.K., said Bowerman. He took a half-stick of No. 2 logger's dynamite and booby-trapped the box. When he came home that night, there was the truck, its right rear wheel blown off. "I didn't want to hurt the guy," Bowerman says. "I just didn't feel like asking him not to hit my mailbox a second time."

Bowerman's firmness of purpose has cost him innumerable talented athletes who would have come to Oregon on hands and knees if he had but beckoned. "Everybody knows about the University of Oregon," he says. "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."

Prefontaine was interested, and hurt. "I thought it very strange and I was a little angry," he says. "I'd get a letter from Bowerman only about once a month, and schools like Villanova were writing me *every day*. I'd get tons of mail. It'd take me an hour and a half at night to read it all. But I knew deep in my heart I wanted to go to Oregon, only Oregon. Then one day I got a very special letter from Bowerman. It blew my mind. Just two paragraphs. It said something like if I want to go to Oregon, under his guidance and supervision, there was no doubt in his mind that I'd be the greatest distance runner in the world. Man, all I could think of was where's the dotted line, I'll sign. I'll never forget the first time I met him. I felt like I was talking to God. I still do."

And Prefontaine went to the mountain. By way of Europe last summer, and his first look at world-class competition. It was a rough trip abroad. Out of six meets, his best was a second in a 5,000 in Augsburg, West Germany. "I really learned. Oh, how I learned," Pre says, laughing. "I remember another 5,000. I was staying up with Lindgren and Jürgen May. I thought I was doing real well. Then the last 600 meters they just ran away from me."

Then he went to college. "The first thing I learned," he says, "is that with Bowerman, school comes first.

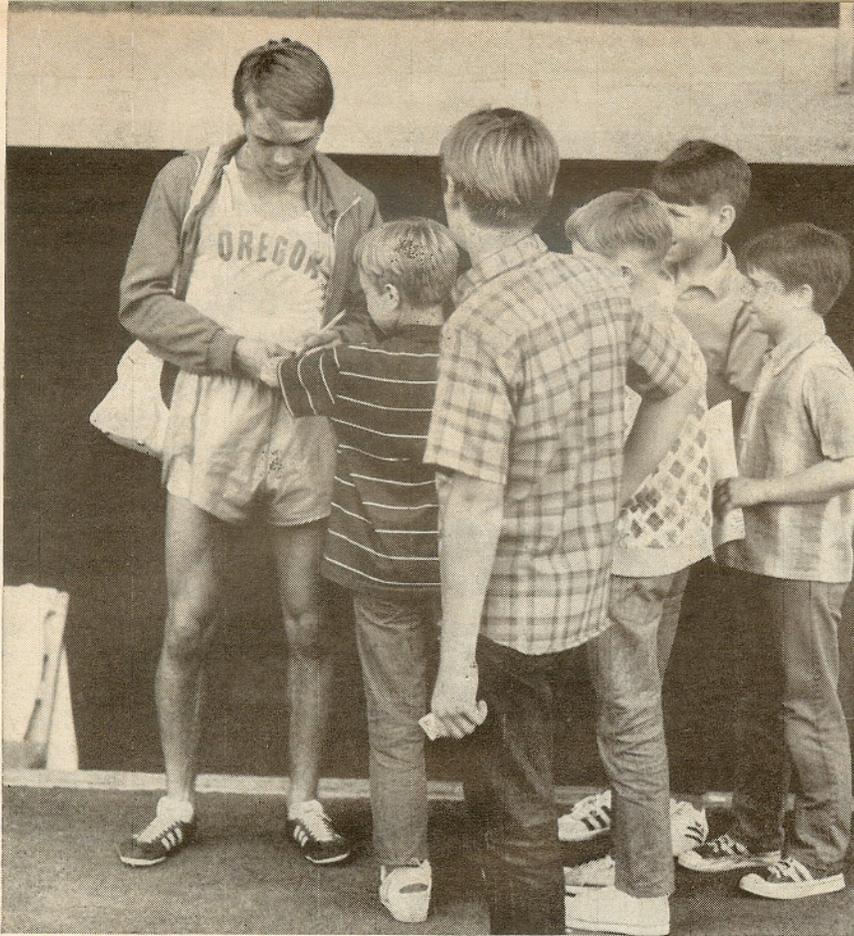
Then athletics. Then what you want to do. He says he is a teacher first, a coach second, and, boy, he means it. The athlete that doesn't learn that in a hurry is in for a lot of trouble. Right now, with the NCAA championships coming up, if I screwed up somehow he'd leave me home. Heck, if he thought it was right, he'd leave the whole team home. He's a man of principle, and for that very reason if he says I can do something, I believe it. It's almost superhuman. He can look at a guy and tell what he can do inside."

Prefontaine opened his collegiate career with the win over Lindgren in the six-mile cross-country race. Their second meeting ended in a photo finish, the judges giving the victory to Lindgren. The NCAAs were next, with Prefontaine third behind Lindgren and Mike Ryan of the Air Force. Then, after a short indoor tour, he scored 10 straight outdoor victories in the mile, the two mile and the three mile. It was in the three mile against Washington State that he did his 13:12.8, the best by an American in two years. As usual, Prefontaine was away fast, setting a burning pace. He passed the two-mile mark in 8:45. "I said, 'Oh, oh, I've never been here before,'" says Prefontaine. "It was unexplored territory. It's strange. You find yourself in a spot in time you've never hit before and you don't know if you can finish. But I'm always exploring myself. I haven't reached the threshold of unconsciousness yet. Maybe I never will."

"Right now," says Bowerman, "he's the greatest *long* middle-distance runner in the world. Lindgren, of course, is the greatest distance runner and he will be—until Steve beats him."

But Bowerman and Prefontaine aren't in a hurry. Bowerman wants his latest ace to progress at a rate of 10% improvement a year over the next 10 years. "We could move him a lot faster," he says, "but by the time he got out of school he'd probably be sick of it and quit. That's what happens to most of our runners. Steve's in no hurry."

"Bowerman is right," says Pre. "I don't want to be like Jim Ryun. No doubt he'll come back, and when he does he'll again be the greatest, but I don't want to go through what he did, all that tremendous pressure when he was so young. It came so quickly. World records at 19. I don't want that. Later, yes.



PREFONTAINE OBLIGES AUTOGRAPH-SEEKERS AFTER HIS DAZZLING RUN IN EUGENE

And when it comes, I'll learn to live with it, but it won't be my first love."

But while in no hurry, Pre doesn't expect to suffer through another summer in Europe. "I'm not the little lamb any more," he says. "Last summer I didn't know what I was doing, but I've become stronger and faster, and where I had 100% confidence before, I've got 100% on top of that. I've been in international competition and now I know what the big boys can do. You don't go out and just run. There's an offense and a defense. When I go back this summer I might not blow anybody off the track, but they'll know I'm there."

The strength, like the confidence, has always been there, and more of both will come. His speed is the key, and it is here, despite Bowerman's fears that Pre might never have as much as he would like, that Pre has shown great improvement. In just a year he has dropped his times in the 100 from 11.2 to 10.7; in the 220 from 25 to 23.2; and in the 440 from 51 to 49. "I can feel myself getting faster all the time," he says. "I work a lot with Roscoe for speed, and he works a lot with me for strength. I don't know if I can keep improving as rapidly as I have this past year, but if I do. . . ." He laughs. "Who knows, maybe in a couple of years I'll

stop running distances and run dashes."

And so last Friday, Steve Prefontaine turned out to see if his newly won speed would help him improve his 4:00.4. "There's no way I can win this race," he said. "But I'm going to try. But if I don't win and I get under four minutes, that would be just as beautiful."

The race was made for a sub-four-minute; the weather was ideal, without a hint of wind, and the track was exceptionally fast. Made of urethane, it had been donated to the university by the late Donald M. Stevenson (class of 1908) and Mrs. Stevenson, and is of the same material that will be used at the 1972 Olympics. "When the Stevensons called and said they'd like to do something for our track program," Bowerman says, "I suggested a rubber asphalt-type all-weather track. Something around \$25,000. They asked how that compared to other compositions. I said it was like buying a Ford and, of course, you could go all the way up to an Olympic-type Cadillac. A week later they called back and told me to buy the Cadillac."

The race was the highlight of the track dedication ceremonies, and it began as expected, with senior Jim Gorman playing the rabbit's role and setting a .59 first-quarter pace. Prefontaine was running third, with Divine seventh. Bow-

erman wanted a 2:00 half. Instead he got a 2:01, and Prefontaine, annoyed at the slow pace, moved sooner than he would have liked. He had the lead at the three-quarters (3:02), and then everybody turned it on.

Into the final lap, with the crowd on its feet and making enough noise for twice its number, Prefontaine kicked. Wilborn made a move at him, but was held off as they went down the backstretch. Then it was all Divine, from fourth to third as they entered the final turn, and then past Prefontaine in the middle of the turn, and home in 3:56.3, his seventh sub-four and his fastest, and the fastest in the world this year. Prefontaine finished in 3:57.4 (third fastest in the world this year). Then came Wilborn (3:58.2), Norm Trerise, an alumnus from Canada (3:59.1) and Steve Savage, a junior steeplechaser (3:59.2). Five in all, and even in Eugene they don't ask for more than that. Bringing up the rear were sophomore Bob Rhen (4:01.6) and senior Tom Morrow (4:01.8).

"How about that?" Prefontaine exulted. "A beautiful sub-four-minute mile. And since it was Roscoe who beat me, I don't even mind that. And that great crowd. Did you hear them?"

And then Bowerman, who is running for the State House of Representatives, following a trail blazed by his father, who was acting governor of Oregon (1910-11), came over to congratulate his youngsters, and they all ducked. He has a dry sense of humor and, while they enjoy it, his athletes are wary of his practical jokes. "Nice going, fellows," he said, and they relaxed. "I guess it wasn't too bad—for a time trial."

"How many sub-four-minute milers does that make, Bill?" said Prefontaine. His athletes call him Bill or Mr. Bowerman, never Coach. It stems from his own days as a track and football star at Oregon. He says his football coach was one of the meanest men in the world, and he insisted upon being called Coach.

"Let's see," said Bowerman. "You and Savage make it nine and 10. Or is it 11? No, 10, as undergraduates. Then if you count Trerise and Jim Grelle, who did it after he got out of school, that makes 12." He thought about that for a moment. Then the mockery came back into his eyes. "Not bad for a guy who won't recruit, is it?" he said and went back up his mountain. **END**