

Best U.S. runners tackle Crystal Springs

Cross Country isn't normally thought of as a spectator sport, especially in these parts, but that should change this Saturday when the 1974 AAU Men's Championship is staged at Crystal Springs in Belmont.

Many of the best distance runners in the world, including Frank Shorter and Steve Prefontaine, will compete on one of the most challenging yet beautiful courses in the country in the gruelling 6.2-mile event.

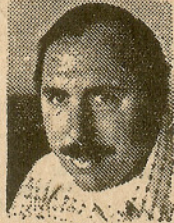
The course, called the "best and most viewable in America" by the co-sponsoring West Valley Track Club and Track and Field Writers of America, is located high atop a ridge in the watershed lands east of Crystal Springs Reservoirs. It can be reached by driving up Ralston Avenue to Hallmark Drive.

Meet director Jack Leydig called a press conference yesterday to promote this very special race and nobody showed up at the Holiday Inn near Marine World in Belmont.

Actually, I shouldn't say nobody showed up. Leydig was there and so were a handful of enthusiastic assistants, but only two hungry Peninsula scribes represented the vast Bay Area media.

Gene Williams

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It's a shame, too, because the food was tasty and the conversation, especially parts spiced by a long-distance telephone interview with Shorter, was even better.

Shorter is favored to win an unprecedented fifth consecutive AAU harrier title Saturday, but he'll have his hands, and legs, full this time. Just about everyone who's anyone in American distance running will be there. Just name one.

Prefontaine and Oregon TC teammate Paul Geis, Englishman Nick Rose who won the NCAA event yesterday, Kenyan John Ngeno who finished second, Ireland's Neil Cusack, Canada's Grant McLaren, two-time

Boston Marathon winner Tom Fleming, Mar Wilson Waigwa, Byron Dyce, Tracy Smith and another prep phenom, Rich Kimball.

If it's local names your're looking for, Stanford standout Duncan Macdonald or Alvaro the three-time Olympian from Colombia who won the Boston Marathon in 1971.

Mejia, 34, lives in Redwood City with his wife (former Olympic swimmer Terri Stickles) and runs 80 miles a week. He knows the Crystal Springs course better than most of the 300-400 entrants, but insists on title-contention condition. "I'll be happy to finish first half," he smiles.

Mejia, sipping on a beer at yesterday's press conference because "it's good for running — has more vitamins than soft drinks," sees Shorter as the man to beat.

"Shorter's my favorite," Alvaro said, "because he's running the hills and he's amazing, the way he handles with the weather.

Shorter, talking by phone from his home in Mexico, said he had been doing extensive hill training in better shape than when he won last year's Gainesville, Fla.

Shorter favorite in AAU race

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By GENE WILLIAMS

Clear weather is forecast for Saturday and the people running the 1974 AAU Men's Cross-Country Championship at Crystal Springs certainly hope so.

Some 300 to 400 entries are expected to show up for the 11 a.m. race, which will cover 10 kilometers, or 6.2 miles, on the Belmont course located in the watershed lands near Ralston Avenue and Hallmark Drive.

Spectators are urged to come early to avoid a late traffic and parking hassle, according to race director Jack Leydig of West Valley Track Club, which is co-hosting the event with the Track and Field Writers of America.

Leydig describes the course as "one of the most beautiful and challenging, the best and most viewable in the country."

The field speaks for itself. Frank Shorter, who has won the last four AAU cross-country titles, shoots for an unprecedented fifth victory against the best harriers the country has to offer.

Shorter's main competition probably will come from Steve Prefontaine and Paul Geis of The Oregon Track Club, Doug Brown of Knoxville, NCAA champ Nick Rose from England, 1974 Boston Marathon king Neil Cusack of Ireland, Marty Liquori, Canada's Brent McLaren, Wilson Waigwa and Tracy Smith.

Alvaro Mejia, who won the Boston Marathon in '71 and now lives in Redwood City and runs for West Valley Track Club, estimates that rain and a muddy path would make the course "50% tougher."