

Pre: The Story of America's Greatest Running Legend, Steve Prefontaine Study Guide

Pre: The Story of America's Greatest Running Legend, Steve Prefontaine by Tom Jordan

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Plot Summary

Pre: The Story of America's Greatest Running Legend, Steve Prefontaine by Tom Jordan is the biography of long distance American runner Steve Prefontaine, whose young life met a tragic end when he died in a car accident at age 24. During his brief career, he set many American records in various track events and won the admiration of many for his mental tenacity and physical endurance.

Steve "Pre" Prefontaine was born in Coos Bay, Oregon, a working-class small town. From the spirit of this town Pre perhaps inherited his legendary work ethic and down-to-earth honesty. Starting his athletic career as an undersized benchwarmer on the junior high football team, Pre became enamored of track and soon began a meteoric rise in the sport. He practiced relentlessly and displayed a kind of toughness and guts that very few of his contemporaries possessed.

From a fantastic high school career, Pre advanced to the University of Oregon under legendary track coach Bill Bowerman. He continued to improve in such events as the two-mile, 5000 meter, and three-mile events. He led his track team to an amazing string of victories at the state championship level. He developed a front-running style in which he would set a torrid pace and lead the pack of runners shortly after the start of a race, wearing his opponents down. He became a celebrity, appearing on the cover of Sports Illustrated and becoming a public relations manager for the fledgling Oregon shoe company Nike. While he excelled in cross country events, Pre relished indoor events because of his raucous supporters, which he called My People.

Breaking American records and setting NCAA Championship records, Pre competed in the 5000 meter in the '72 Munich Olympics. As many others, Pre was affected emotionally and mentally by the terrorist attacks against Israeli athletes that took place. Pre led for much of the race but was eventually outlasted, running out of gas and placing fourth.

After continued collegiate success, Pre became a non-collegiate amateur athlete. He fought for amateur athletes and was very outspoken about amateur athlete's financial difficulties and the monopoly the Amateur Athlete Union (AAU) had on amateur sports. After a mixed 1974 European season, Pre prepared for the '76 Olympic games.

Sadly, he would never reach those games. On May 30, 1975, after a party, Pre crashed his car at a sharp curve in the road. The car rolled over and pinned him underneath; by the time police arrive, Pre was crushed to death. Pre left a legacy with his work ethic and never-give-up attitude. He brought Nike to international prominence. Soon after his death amateur athletics was improved via congressional legislation.



Chapter 1

Chapter 1 Summary and Analysis

Steve Roland Prefontaine was born on January 25, 1951 in the coastal fishing town of Coos Bay, Oregon, to working-class parents. His father was a welder and carpenter, and his mother was a seamstress.

Steve's youth was unremarkable. He would zoom around on his scooter or go belly-boarding in the summers. Sports was a huge tradition in the small town, with basketball and football especially popular. Steve tried hard to measure up, but in 8th grade was somewhat of a physical runt, at 5-feet, 100 pounds. He benchwarmed for his junior high football team; however, soon he was attracted to the cross country running he saw from the bench. During a three-week physical conditioning program, he found he had a knack for running, so as a freshman entering Marshfield High in 1965, he entered the cross country program. He progressed quickly, from 7th man to 2nd man that season.

In his sophomore year he trained hard during the winter and placed 5th in the Oregon Invitational; however, he failed to make the state meet two-mile run. Spurred by failure, Steve planned on training harder than ever in order to go undefeated in his junior season. At this time he began to acquire a reputation for enduring the mental and physical punishment of endless training. Steve's high school coach, Walt McClure, declared him the hardest trainer he ever encountered. Steve met his goal and went unbeaten his junior year. He continued to train 4 to 8 miles per day while keeping up no less than 3 part-time jobs.

Senior year began with aggressive goals for a 9:00 minute two-mile run. While he sometimes couldn't match his lofty goals, he pressed himself endlessly. He constantly had to correct his poor posture while running. After constant training and meets, Steve won unprecedented victories in both the one-mile and two-mile Oregon meets. Around this time, many colleges began to recruit Steve for college. Steve chose the University of Oregon due to its legendary coach, Bill Bowerman, and Bowerman's promise to make Steve a world-class runner. Steve won the last race of his high school career with a personal one-mile best of 4:06 minutes.

The 1969 Amateur Athletic Union (AAU) Championships were to be held that June, and Steve ran a meet to earn fourth place for a spot as a reserve member. The AAU at that time governed cross country amateur athletics Steve became a starter when he was informed that one of the starters decided to run in another race. Unfortunately, days later Steve was informed that the starter decided to run in the AAU Championship after all. Steve was very angry, especially because he had trained hard and had developed a mentality as a starter. As it turns out, the starter pulled out due to illness and Steve got to run after all. This would prove to be the first of many conflicts Steve would have with the AAU. In the Championships, Steve placed a respectable fifth place.



Chapter 2

Chapter 2 Summary and Analysis

Entering the University of Oregon, Steve had the thought to take up a major that would lead to either insurance work or interior decorating. He eventually chose Broadcast Communications. Steve's rural ways and unsure behavior in his freshman year led his cross country team to nickname him "The Rube."

In the late 1960s, and especially at University of Oregon, there was an anti-athlete sentiment. This manifested itself in dirty notes and late-night crank calls with which Steve and his team had to deal. Steve displayed mental toughness, ignoring these things and continuing to improve as a runner. He raced fellow prodigy Gerry Lindgren to a near tie (though Lindgren won) in the Pac-8 cross country meet in Stanford. Lindgren would again edge Steve in the NCAA Championship meet that year. This is the last time Steve would lose a NCAA race.

In the spring season, Steve scored impressive victories in three-mile races, beating his personal record. He won the NCAA three-mile race despite an ankle injury suffered in a diving board accident. In the AAU invitational, Steve finished fifth, enough to gain him a spot for an AAU meet in West Germany. There, Steve became furious when an older runner named Harald Norpoth ran behind him for the whole race only to speed past him in the last few yards to take the victory. Steve didn't feel a "veteran" runner should run behind a "kid" like him in a race. Steve was a frequent complainer on the track.

Steve went 21 straight collegiate meets without a loss heading into 1971. He was quickly becoming a celebrity. He appeared on the cover of Sports Illustrated as a freshman. Steve was ambivalent about fame, proud about newspaper articles about him, which he saved in a scrapbook, but suspicious of those around him who might like him only for his celebrity status.

Victories continued to mount up - against runner Steve Stageberg (who was tested to have the greatest oxygen-intake ability of any athlete ever tested), against future Olympic gold medalist Ethiopian Miruts Yifter, against a strong Russian team in an international meet, and against talented runner Garry Bjorklund. After Steve's freshman year, he never lost a cross country race.

Media and teammates began around this time to call Steve Prefontaine "Pre," a name that stuck with him his entire life (and the name this guide will use for him from now on).

Though Pre excelled in cross country races, indoor arena races gave Steve a thrill due to the crowd; sometimes he obviously fed off of the energy of the crowd. At the Los Angeles Times indoor meet, he crushed the field by a half a lap, a field filled with Olympic hopefuls and a record-holder of the two-mile run. By this time, Steve had set

American records in the 5000 meters and had won gold at the Pan Am games. His confidence was at an all-time high.



Chapter 3

Chapter 3 Summary and Analysis

Various people recall Pre's charisma. There was a magnetism about Pre that many found irresistible, and some described as cocky or prideful. He became a celebrity at the University and hated it, not because of the notoriety but because people felt they could not approach him or disagree with him. Pre was very talkative and outspoken, especially about the plight of amateur athletes such as himself, who were forced to struggle financially due to their inability to get paid for their performances or take endorsements. Despite the celebrity, Pre lived his daily life like many other poor amateur athletes, taking a beat-up old car to school, living in a small trailer home with a roommate, and doing odd jobs to make ends meet.

The 1972 season featured a classically Prefontaine race that many of his fans call "The Race Pre Should Have Lost." Pre ran against Oregon State and a world-class Ethiopian athlete named Hailu Ebba. It was billed as a race between Pre the immovable object and the faster Ebba, the irresistible force. In a racing style that would define him, Pre front-ran (led the pack) for nearly the entire race, outracing even Ebba to arrive at a personal record in the 1500 meter race. Pre closed out the 1972 collegiate season with a victory at the NCAA championships and then set his sights on the Olympics.



Chapter 4

Chapter 4 Summary and Analysis

The 1972 Olympic Trials were billed as "America's greatest distance race of all time." Among the fine field, now 21-year-old Pre's main competition was 34-year-old George Young, former world record-holder in the two mile. Though getting old for a track and field athlete, Young had the kind of drive and intensity that could match Pre.

In the race, after the initial lap Pre again took the lead in his trademark front-running style. He outpaced everyone, tiring Young and eventually opening up an insurmountable eight-yard lead with a lap to go, winning the trial. As always, Pre was gracious in victory, asking Young to run a victory lap with him.

With the trial won, Pre turned to severe training sessions, headed by assistant track coach Bill Dellinger. Together they made the journey to Munich for the Olympics. Pre battled homesickness and nervous energy in the Olympic village waiting for the race. Pre-olympic runs and warm-up meets went well, though Pre complained a bit as usual.

Pre's psyche became shattered with the tragedy of the terrorist attack, in which Israeli athletes were held hostage and murdered at the hands of Arab terrorists. Coach Dellinger realized Pre would be upset and so took Pre out of the Olympic village and they stayed elsewhere. Still, Pre became disillusioned with the Olympics, its glamor lost in the tragedy, and he was also angry at the memorial service for the athletes postponing his event because he thought it gave other runners a competitive advantage.

Finally, the 5000 meter event arrived. The 13 runners are perhaps the finest collection of 5000 meter runners in Olympic history, including Lasse Viren, Dave Bedford, Ian Steward, Mohamed Gamoudi, and Harald Norpoth. On a hot and muggy day, the race began very slowly. This was bad for Pre, as a slower race favors the "kickers," those very fast runners who put on bursts of speed at the end of races, rather than a slower but more endurance-oriented runner like Pre, who should be wearing his opponents down by front-running and setting the pace. Pre eventually pulled out in front, racing with Lasse Viren. Pre twice tried to burst ahead of Viren, but veteran runner Gamoudi cut him off each time with perfectly-timed moves. Outmatched by the kicker runners, Pre physically broke down in the last lap and finished fourth, out of medal contention. He was devastated emotionally and physically. Viren took the gold.

Later, Pre spoke to a reporter, Blaine Newnham, and expressed his anger and competitive pride. Pre said the pace wasn't fast enough, and that Gamoudi's moves to cut him off were dirty tricks. Pre vowed to pull the same dirty tricks in the next races he ran because it was high time Americans learned to play dirty like the Europeans. Even though he lost, no one could question the drive and guts of Pre.



Chapter 5

Chapter 5 Summary and Analysis

Following the disappointment of the Olympics, Pre returned to his quiet Oregon life and did not participate in the 1972 cross country season. To many competitors and coaches, Pre seemed more human and able to relate and less invincible and distant.

In the 1973 indoor season, Steve continued to win races, seeming to again feed off the fevered energy of the massive crowds that came to see him. Pre remarked that it was the "people shouting" that would carry him across the finish line. In his first competitive six-mile of the year, he set an American record.

At the Oregon Twilight meet, Pre complained that his "legs were dead" and that he didn't want to race, but Coach Dellinger reminded him about how the crowd was there to see him, and Pre raced a mile of 3:55.0, a mark bested by only two Americans before him at that time. Pre would display this sort of complaining and self-doubt throughout his short career, only to run an incredible race after any grumbling was out of his system.

As Pre was close to graduation, the media looked for a "heir apparent" to succeed Pre, and settled on Paul Geis, a student who transferred to Oregon from Texas. It was an unfair rivalry created solely by the media, as Pre and Geis never saw themselves in competition, and in reality Geis was never the runner Pre was. In Pre's "farewell appearance," the Oregon Twilight II meet in front of his home fans, Pre became enraged at Geis for trying to out-front-run him, taking Geis' competitiveness as Geis' attempt to show Pre up in front of his crowd as "rivals." Geis was simply running and competing.

In his last track race, the 1973 NCAA Championship in Baton Rouge, Pre beat his closest competitor by 5 seconds, setting a new personal best in the 5000 meters.

Pre's selflessness is demonstrated in his constant willingness to be the main draw in various track invitationals put on by the University of Oregon. In one of these invitationals, he invited Dave Wottle, the Olympic 800-meter champion, to a one-mile race. Pre was competitive but never dominant at so short a race, and Dave Wottle edged him by less than a second, but this episode proved Pre cared about his fans and was willing to lose a race in a format that was not his specialty to raise funds for the university and please fans.

That summer in Europe, as part of the AAU set of international meets, Pre raced in various events. He was less focused on winning than simply gaining international experience at this point in his career; however, his competitiveness never left Pre. Pre was especially angry at a loss to German Harald Norpoth, who had an unorthodox running style Pre detested.

At this time, Pre also raced in three non-AAU sanctioned events, most likely for financial gain. Many amateur athletes at this time would be paid "under the table" by promoters



looking to fill seats. These "midnight payments" were demeaning and indicative of the hypocrisy of the amateur system against which Pre always fought. Pre cut his European AAU tour short because of sciatica (nerve inflammation in the legs and back), Pre's only running-related injury.

Pre returned to the U.S. to participate in the 1973 cross country season (which he was eligible for because he skipped the 1972 season). He beat his rival John Ngeno in a close race but was looking mortal to some, due to increasing sciatica back pain. Pre's confidence was low and he was panicked about his back. Nevertheless, in the 1973 cross country NCAA Championship, he led his team to victory, beating the young up-and-comer Nick Rose even though Pre trailed at one point by 50 yards.

At the commencement of the 1974 indoor arena season, Pre finally lost to a runner named Dick Buerkle, running out of steam in the last lap to lose by 7 seconds. This was his first loss in a more than one-mile race since 1970. In one teammate's phrase, Pre was "super-pissed," and perhaps left his emotions on the field of the next race. Pre, described by some as "in a trance," ran world-record times for several portions of the race before slowing down but nonetheless setting an American record.

Chapter 6

Chapter 6 Summary and Analysis

The author maintains that, in order to be a world-class runner, one must possess three qualities: physical ability, mental tenacity, and hard work. Pre had all these in ample supply. Every morning at 6AM he would run several six-minute miles. He would never run more than 10 or 12 miles because he got bored. To fight boredom, Pre would always challenge his team members to find new running routes.

Pre had unbelievable physical endurance. His coach Bill Dellinger remarked that he never failed to show up at a meet due to injury or illness. On the track, Pre pushed himself until he nearly collapsed, leaving his track mates far behind. In any workout, Pre always had to be number one, or he would become angry, and at the next workout he would blow away the previous leader.



Chapter 7

Chapter 7 Summary and Analysis

The spring of 1974 was Pre's first year as an "open" athlete, meaning he did not have to participate in the brutal frequency of the collegiate season and could thus pick his events, which were fewer and farther in between. He moved from his trailer to a home in Eugene, Oregon.

Life as an unpaid amateur athlete was very difficult financially. Now he did not even receive the small \$101 stipend for room and board he used to get at the University. Financial help came in the form of a new job he got from a fledgling Oregon shoe company - Nike. His title was "National Public Relations Manager," a title Pre probably made up himself. He attended public events, ran running clinics for kids, worked the floor of the first Nike retail store, and learned about shoe making. For this he was paid \$5000 annually, something clearly against the rules of amateur athletics as set up at the time. In May 1974, Pre was sent a letter by the AAU, condemning his behavior when he wore a sweat suit with a NIKE logo on it. Pre was forced to wear a suit without the logo.

At this time, an organization called the International Track Association (ITA) formed in order to establish a popular professional circuit in America for running. The ITA badly wanted a star like Pre and eventually offered him an unheard-of \$100,000 to come run for them. Pre was sorely tempted by this money to turn pro and wave goodbye to financial problems and conflicts with the AAU, but by turning pro he would forfeit a chance to participate in the 1976 Olympic games.

Before those games, however, would come the European season, which for the first time Pre could focus on and train for specifically. In this spirit, Pre skipped the AAU championships altogether. The AAU felt snubbed by their star athlete, and the relationship between Pre and the AAU continued to deteriorate. The first of his European preparation races was called the Hayward Restoration meet. His main opponent was Frank Shorter, a man who had won gold in the '72 marathon. After a race in which Shorter and Pre left everyone behind, Pre edge Shorter by 0.6 seconds to win. After the race, Pre attributed his victory to "His People," the screaming fans of Oregon.

Chapter 8

Chapter 8 Summary and Analysis

The author re-emphasizes the special relationship Pre had with his fans from Eugene, Oregon and other places in Oregon. He had rock-star-level popularity and never forgot from where he came. The author quotes several acquaintances of Pre's and their brief remembrances of him. Pre is characterized as a kind, honest, focused man. He helped his community and talked to people like a human being and not like a celebrity. He liked to work with his hands, as evidenced by the garden he grew in the backyard and the sauna he built in his garage. He cared about women's track and followed it closely. He took his dog to class and drank beers like a regular guy. But, everyone agreed, his races were far from regular. They had a unique ability to electrify an audience.

Chapter 9

Chapter 9 Summary and Analysis

Europe was an exciting prospect for American runners, as Europe featured the best track and field athletes in the world, and running was a more popular sport in Europe than in America. In his first race in the 1974 European season, a 3000-meter in Finland, Pre beat a field including an Olympic gold medalist by more than 4 seconds.

However, in the next few races of the season, Pre suffered defeat after defeat. He set three American records but was nonetheless beat by European athletes the likes of Knut Kvalheim and Rod Dixon. Interviewed runners had various theories for why Pre struggled in Europe. Europe had a different season, and so Pre's fitness level probably peaked earlier than European athletes' levels. He was used to blowing people away in Eugene, and so a tougher field with more opponents who could keep pace with him may have intimidated him or thrown him off his game. Runner Marty Liquori stated that Pre's only drawback as a runner was that he could not "kick" as hard as some other elite runners in the last 100 yards. The European style was to follow the leader and then run all-out in the last 100 yards; whereas, Pre's style was to lead. Regardless, Pre was disappointed in his season, even though he set several American records.

In a meet back in Oregon, Pre put on an impromptu one mile race. That day was a "field burning day" in which farmers burned the ground cover left after harvesting; thus, the air was of very poor quality. Regardless, Pre ran a sub-4:00 mile and paid for it with lung irritation and burning from the materials in the air. Pre went back to Europe and raced a race in Finland. The lung irritation affected him and knocked him out of contention. He was coughing up blood at the end of the race. Three nights later at another race, Pre hurt so bad that he could not finish the race. It was the only race of his career that he did not finish. Doctors diagnosed torn muscle fibers under the rib cage, the result of running the mile in the smoke-filled air. Pre vowed never to run in such conditions again.



Chapter 10

Chapter 10 Summary and Analysis

By January 1975, Pre had permanently decided to pursue the Olympics as an amateur and suffer poverty for two more years rather than turn pro. That same month, he was invited to the Institute for Aerobics Research in Dallas as part of a comprehensive test of elite athletes. Like everything else in his life, Pre treated it as a very serious competition. In the most important test, the VO₂ max test which measures the maximum volume of oxygen that can be dispatched to the muscles during exercise, Pre scored an 84 plus, a score that only one or two athletes in the world could match.

Going from the Dallas tests right into the 1975 indoor season, Pre was battling a sinus condition and recurrent sciatica as he entered the Los Angeles Times Indoor meet. He placed fifth, the worst placement in his career since high school. But typically, Pre came back more determined than before, beating old rival John Ngeno in a two-mile race.

At this time, Frank Shorter (Olympic marathoner) invited Pre into the ice and snow of the Colorado mountains in order to do high-altitude training. This was considered the best and most severe training for Olympic preparation, as the Kenyan runners were starting to exhibit. The two runners spent a brutal week or so in the mountains running.

Around this time, Pre had achieved a level of celebrity that allowed him to be outspoken like never before. He continued to tell reporters and anyone else who would listen about the plight of amateur athletes. Pre and others called the current amateur athletic program "shamateurism" (as in a sham, a joke) because of the inability of athletes to make a living and the hypocrisy of the AAU amid under the table payments and such. Pre also stirred controversy in an interview later called Pre's "To hell with love of country" speech, in which Pre stated he didn't run for America or patriotism "and all that bull" but for himself. He was also plainly anti-war. Pre was always honest and did not have a filter for the media.

After this training, Pre had the idea to bring a European-style meet to Eugene, Oregon. He invited the Finnish track team to Oregon for a meet, as negotiated through the AAU. During these negotiations and the various logistics of making the meet happen, Pre showed a more mature and businesslike side. His meet was dealt a blow when Finnish superstar runner Lasse Viren pulled out at the last minute, but nonetheless Pre was able to make the Finnish meet a success, and in his event, the 5000 meter, he won before his adoring fans in Eugene. This was May 29, 1975, and would prove to be his last race.



Chapter 11

Chapter 11 Summary and Analysis

May 29, 1975 was the date of Pre's last race, and the morning of May 30 was the date of the car accident that would take his life. After his 5000 meter win, Pre did victory laps and said goodbye to his fans. He visited his friend to shower, visited his former coach Bill Dellinger, and went with his girlfriend Nancy to the Paddock Tavern, where he had a few beers and chatted with friends. Pre and Nancy then visited the house of Geoff Hollister for a party to celebrate the successful Finnish meet. From there, at about 12:15am, Pre dropped his girlfriend off at her car and then dropped off his friend Frank Shorter.

Driving back home on Skyline Boulevard, for reasons still largely unknown, Pre's vehicle ran off the road, hit a natural rock at a sharp curve, and flipped over, pinning Pre underneath. A neighbor, Bill Alvarado, heard the crash and came out to see what happened. He tried to help Pre, but the car would not budge and Pre could not be freed. At that time Pre was still alive. Bill ran back to his home to call the police. By the time the police arrived, Pre was dead.

The mortician conducted a blood sample and found Pre's blood-alcohol level to be well above the Oregon legal limit. Many wrote off the accident as yet another drunk driving fatality, but Pre's friends thought he was not that impaired despite having a few drinks. Some speculate he was changing a cassette tape or had swerved to avoid another car. But as the author states, the result is the same.

The news of Pre's death was met with numbness and shock in the Eugene community. Soon scores of eulogies were pouring into local newspapers and TV stations. The governor himself, Tom McCall, wrote an eloquent eulogy. A memorial service was held at Pre's high school track, Pirate Stadium, and he was buried in his home town of Coos Bay wearing his Olympic uniform.



Chapter 12

Chapter 12 Summary and Analysis

Chapter 12 summarizes the legacy of Pre. Pre felt running was a gift, but a gift mainly achieved through hard work and tenacity, and that tenacity was his biggest asset on the track and the quality everyone remembers about the runner. His fight against the AAU and "shamateurism" was continued by his fellow runners, and in 1978, Congress passed the Amateur Sports Act, which broke the stranglehold the AAU had on amateur athletics and improved the lives of athletes. The runners Pre touched and affected went on to various degrees of success in the Olympics and elsewhere. Another part of Pre's legacy was his relationship with Nike. Pre was Nike's first superstar athlete, and Pre helped to direct international attention to the then-small shoe company. At Nike's corporate headquarters, the Prefontaine building serves as a reminder of Pre.

Other tributes to Pre include the Prefontaine Classic invitational meet and the Prefontaine Memorial 10K race, annual events taking place in Oregon. Many still make pilgrimages to Pre's Rock, the rock that Pre likely crashed against in his fatal car wreck.



Characters

Steve Prefontaine

Steve Prefontaine, or "Pre," is the subject of this biography. Pre went from a benchwarming runt on the junior high football team to a world-class medium distance runner, setting many American records and falling just short of a medal in the 1972 Munich Olympics. He was tragically killed in a car accident at the age of 24, the probable result of Pre's drinking and driving.

Pre amazed everyone with his endurance, both physical and mental. He suffered severely harsh training regimens and, during races, pushed his body to the absolute limit. A sterling high school track career was eclipsed by achievements as a member of the University of Oregon's track team under coach Bill Bowerman, including a years-long streak of winning finishes on races over one-mile, from 1970 to 1974.

Pre gave the proverbial 110%, the first to arrive at the track and the last to leave. Competitive in everything he did, Pre would become irate if he was beat by a team member in a mere exercise session or morning jog. Appropriate to his brash, self-assured style and outspoken attitude, Pre was a premier front-running athlete, leading the pack and setting the pace in order to wear out his opponents before the final stretch.

Despite celebrity at a young age, Pre took pride in his "regular guy" demeanor. He drank beer with the guys at the local tavern and was never above signing autographs or chatting with his Eugene, Oregon fans. Pre used his celebrity for a number of charity efforts, including establishing a running program at the state penitentiary and participating in running clinics for kids. He was the loudest critic of the Amateur Athletic Union and its mistreatment of amateur athletes at the time.

Pre's People

Though Pre excelled in cross country events, the events that Pre found truly special were indoor and outdoor track meets in his university town of Eugene, Oregon. Pre amassed a huge following of racing fans who became feverish and loud supporters of Pre. Pre referred to his Eugene fans as "My People." This familial bond had several consequences. The electricity in the crowd would spur Pre on, especially during his close races, giving him a boost or extra fuel he needed to capture a win. Off the track, Pre was always deferential and appreciative of "Pre's People." He attributed his success and especially his unbroken win streak at Hayward Field in Eugene to his rabidly loyal fans. Pre was also concerned with giving his people a good race. Even when injured or mentally drained, Pre only had to be reminded of the fans who came to see him and would run an incredible race. He also refused to go pro in part because of the support he received from Eugene fans and the fact that he knew they wanted him to participate in the Olympics.



Some may say that Pre depended too much on the crowd. He was always his best on his home track, and part of the blame for his lackluster European races could be Pre's overdependence on his fans and the adoration from the crowd. Regardless, Pre had a special relationship with "Pre's People," achieving a rock-star, legendary status among this core group unheard of in track and field. As one of Pre's People, track fan John Gillespie stated, it was a local legend that the clouds parted and the sun shone when Pre stepped onto a track.

Walt McClure

Walt McClure was Pre's high school coach, one of the first people to recognize Pre's world-class abilities. Walt was wise and urged Pre to pace himself, to not waste his best races and efforts in high school but to save them for later in his career.

Bill Bowerman

Bill Bowerman was the University of Oregon's legendary track coach and the man who convinced Pre to attend the University. In addition to coaching Pre during his fantastic collegiate career, Bowerman retired from coaching to co-found Nike company, using Pre as his first public relations spokesman and sports figure.

Harald Norpoth

Harald Norpoth was a contemporary runner of Pre's, a very thin German described as having a "wraith-like" style of running. For one reason or another Pre hated being beaten by a man with an unorthodox style, and so Norpoth became a rival in Pre's eyes. They would race in several European races.

Paul Geis

Paul Geis was trumpeted by the media as Pre's "heir apparent" at the University of Oregon. This was an unfair comparison, as Geis did not have the talent or the drive Pre possessed. Their rivalry as a result was largely a creation of the media, but in a sort of self-fulfilling prophecy, the media coverage drove a wedge between the two men.

Bill Dellinger

Bill Dellinger was a former Olympic runner and former University of Oregon athlete who was the assistant coach under Bill Bowerman when Pre attended. Dellinger worked very closely with Pre, managing his training regimen, offering personal coaching, and going with Pre to the 1972 Munich Olympics.



Frank Shorter

Frank Shorter captured the Olympic gold in the marathon event. Simultaneously a rival and a friend to Pre, Frank invited Pre for high-altitude training in New Mexico and became a close training partner of Pre's. Frank was perhaps the last of Pre's friends to see him alive.

Dick Buerkle

Dick Buerkle was an underdog competitor who beat Pre in a race during the 1974 indoor season. This defeat was the first defeat Pre suffered in competition in an event over one-mile since 1970.

Lasse Viren

Lasse Viren captured the 1972 gold medal in the 5000 meter event, passing and outlasting Pre. Viren is a legendary and very successful Olympic athlete, a track star and a frequent competitor of Pre's, especially in the European contests.



Objects/Places

Coos Bay, Oregon

Coos Bay, Oregon, the birthplace of Steve Prefontaine, is a small, working-class coastal town. Author Jordan and others believe Pre may have inherited the town's work ethic and no-nonsense approach and used it to become a world-class runner.

The Amateur Athletic Union

The Amateur Athletic Union, or AAU, was the organizational body that controlled most American amateur athletics in the late 60s and early 70s. Pre was forever in conflict with the body for not allowing amateur athletes any amount of financial compensation for their efforts, leading to hardship, hypocrisy and "under the table" payments to athletes. In 1978 the stranglehold the AAU had on amateur athletics would come to an end via congressional legislation.

University of Oregon

Pre attended the University of Oregon in Eugene after its legendary track coach Bill Bowerman vowed to make him a world-class athlete. He led the track team to many victories, both outdoor and indoor, and several consecutive NCAA state championships.

Shamateurism

Shamateurism was the derogatory term that athletes in Pre's time used for the amateur athletics program in the United States as controlled by the AAU. The AAU expressly forbid compensation of any kind for amateur athletes, leading to hypocrisy, strongarm tactics as far as what events athletes could attend, and "under the table" payments. Pre was an outspoken critic of shamateurism.

1972 Munich Olympics

The 1972 Munich Olympics began with the tragedy of the kidnapping and killing of several Israeli athletes by a terrorist group, an event which shook Pre deeply. In Pre's event, the 5000 meters, Pre led for much of the way but was overtaken eventually and blocked from passing twice, running out of fuel in the last 100 yards to finish fourth and out of medal contention.



Hayward Field

Hayward Field is the track at the University of Oregon. At any event over a mile, Pre was never beaten at Hayward Field in front of his adoring fans.

Nike

University of Oregon coach Bill Bowerman retired to co-found the Nike shoe company, and Pre became its first public relations man, spokesman, and star athlete. Pre was a huge factor in Nike's international prominence and rise to the large company it is today.

The 1974 European Season

After a very successful collegiate career, Pre set several American records in the 1974 European season but still managed to lose many of his matches. Pre's lack of dominance in Europe was attributed to different fitness cycles between American and European athletes, among other factors.

VO2 Max Test

Among sports scientists, the VO2 max test was considered the ultimate mark of the quality of a world-class athlete. It measured the maximum volume of oxygen that a body could send to the muscles during exercise. Pre scored an 84+ on the test, putting him in league with the top two or three elite athletes in the world.

Pre's Rock

The rock located at a steep curve on Skyline Boulevard that Pre likely ran into during his fatal car accident currently serves as a memorial to Pre. Many still visit every year to pay respects.



Themes

Mental Tenacity

The one trait Pre's multitude of fans, coaches, friends, and competitors cite as Pre's defining characteristic is his "gutsiness," his mental tenacity, his ability to somehow will his body to victory. Some would remember Pre's "killer instinct," his ability to sense his competitor's weakness and initiate a spurt at just the right moment to unnerve and defeat his opponent. There was also Pre's legendary focus, a singular ability that not only allowed Pre to endure the boredom, tedium, and pain of large and frequent training sessions, but which allowed Pre to fight injury and illness and to never be intimidated by an opponent. Pre only failed to finish one race in his career due to injury (some time before the race he had run on a "field burning day" on which dangerous inhalants were in the air, damaging his lungs).

Pre's training sessions were legendary. He would always wake at 6AM and perform six-minute miles, 4 to 8 miles at a time. Pre would never let a teammate lead or beat him in an exercise session. On the track, he left each of his teammates in the proverbial dust, even in mere practices. Pre's front-running style, in which he led the pack and set the pace, is indicative of this mental tenacity, this all-or-nothing mentality. Pre would run every race to the point of exhaustion, simply outlasting athletes with better pure running talents than he possessed. Pre was the definition of a fighter. Any defeat only pushed Pre to go farther and harder. Very few could match Pre's mental toughness.

Advocate for Amateur Athletes

Throughout Pre's short career, he came into conflict with the organization that controlled amateur athletics, the Amateur Athletic Union or AAU. The tension and outright enmity between Pre and the AAU would be a recurrent theme no matter where Pre raced. Pre's first run-in with the AAU came when poor communication and belated notification caused massive confusion as to whether Pre would race or not in the 1969 AAU Championships. Pre's on-again, off-again status ruined his mental concentration—Pre was already a petulant runner—a condition he blamed on the AAU.

AAU was the frequent target for Pre as he endured relative poverty in college. As the AAU strictly forbade any financial rewards for being an amateur athlete, Pre had to live on his wits and a measly \$101 stipend from the university. Pre, self-assured, knew that his talents were worth much more; in Pre's mind, the AAU was being unfairly enriched by the sweat of his own brow rather than theirs. Later in Pre's career, Pre would pass over the AAU Championships for European races, enraging AAU brass and causing further tension. Pre's relationship with Nike was scrutinized by the AAU, and in one instance the AAU wrote Pre a letter threatening to revoke his amateur status if he continued to wear a sweat suit with a NIKE logo on it.



Pre is depicted as a sort of crusader against the mafia-like AAU; his fight was continued by Frank Shorter and others after Pre's death. Author Tom Jordan largely attributes the AAU's diminished power in the mid 1970s and the improvement in amateur athletics to Pre's efforts.

The Two Faces of Pre

Pre attained fame at an early age. By the time he was 18, he was already a track star throughout Oregon, and being featured on the cover of Sports Illustrated only further cemented his celebrity status. Pre's amazing feats in college, but most of all his colorful personality in a usually muted sport, propelled Pre to stardom. However, author Tom Jordan is careful to repeatedly emphasize Pre's "normal guy" demeanor. Pre both admired and avoided his celebrity status, and this duality is a frequent topic in the book. Pre was careful about his image, clipping newspaper articles of his exploits into a scrapbook, but at the same time he resented when people treated him differently or were intimidated by his fame. He was suspicious of sycophancy and aggressively stamped it out when he perceived it among his track mates or college friends. Pre took some pride in the fact that he drove a beat-up car and drank beers at the local tavern like any other resident of Eugene.

Still, Pre realized he was unique and had a gift. He hated to see talent wasted, especially in himself, and so he trained and competed like few others. Pre used his celebrity for philanthropic purposes such as setting up running clinics for kids and a running program for inmates at the state penitentiary. He also did fundraising for his university by setting up track meets in which he would compete and be the star of the show. However, he never lost his connection to the local Eugene, Oregon crowd and would never hesitate to honor his fans, cite their applause as his race fuel, and sign autographs for his young fans. Pre never wanted to be known simply as a runner and had a view to a future when he would not be a world-class athlete. He tended a garden and built a sauna because he liked to work with his hands. When friends came together in a memorial service for Pre after Pre's death, many sides of Pre came to light of which few knew.



Style

Perspective

In journalistic fashion, Tom Jordan backs up his race accounts with a plethora of first- and second-hand quotations; Jordan's "stride-by-stride" accounting of racing appears very researched and objective. However, it is evident that Jordan has a lot of admiration bordering on adoration for Steve Prefontaine. The subject of this biography is clearly a man the author wants the reader to admire and see the man's positive qualities. This stance lends a bit of a selective quality to the text and harms objectivity. For example, very little is mentioned of Prefontaine's "To heck with love of country" speech, although the speech at the time was quite controversial and polarizing. The fact that Prefontaine was drinking hardly factors in to Jordan's elegiac prose in the last couple of chapters; an opportunity to warn against drinking and driving is missed. Given this prejudice, the reader is compelled to wonder if the author has painted a much rosier picture of Steve Prefontaine than reality would dictate, especially when the author excuses Pre's cockiness as honesty and arrogance as focus. In this vein, in the Preface, the author admits that he primarily focused on Pre's outdoor track record rather than indoor arena record, because it was Pre's favorite venue and because Pre did the best in outdoor track. This is clearly a prejudicial selection.

Tone

The tone of the narrative is one of adoration/adulation for Pre, his personal qualities, and his accomplishments. This is not only reflected in the title - could a man with such a short career be "America's Greatest Running Legend"? - and in the prose, but in the selected quotations author Jordan has culled from various runners, coaches, co-workers, and contemporary journalists who encountered Pre. There is a touch of awe to the narrative, a mystical quality about Pre that is commented on, and it is clear Jordan wishes to retain some of that elusive mystique concerning Pre. For Jordan, Pre was less a product of prodigious natural talent and more a product of incredible hard work and an indefatigable spirit, the kind of inspirational figure the reader can look up to and strive to match.

The tone is most obvious in the last couple of chapters which detail Pre's last race and the details of his last night alive before his fatal car accident, proceeding into Pre's legacy and how he is remembered. The tone for these passages is one of mourning, of emotion, of the sense that greatness has been lost forever. This tone is again mirrored in the selected quotations, in which one race fan cites a local legend that the clouds parted for Pre whenever he appeared on a track. Per the title, Pre is given legendary status and conferred with the kind of idolatry perhaps reserved for those who burn brightly but get extinguished early.

Structure

Pre is a biography of runner Steve Prefontaine. It proceeds in roughly chronological style, from Pre's birth in Coos Bay, Oregon, to high school running success, to collegiate success and celebrity, to his disappointment in the '72 Olympic games, to his tragic car-accident death at 24 at the height of his running career.

Author Tom Jordan blends a variety of texts in order to achieve this biography. For example, there are some special inset paragraphs with quotes directly from some of the runners who knew Pre best, commenting on the man and their impressions of him. There are three sections of black-and-white photographs taken by both professional and amateur photographers of Pre that help to capture the spirit of the runner. The narrative itself is divided into 12 chapters; each (roughly) is equivalent to a distinct portion of Pre's life. Some chapters are purely chronological. Chapter 1 is dedicated to Pre's childhood up until college, and Chapter 9 is dedicated to Pre's 1974 European running season. Other chapters are more conceptual than chronological. Chapter 8, for example, focuses on Pre's relationship to his fans and not about any particular time in Pre's life. Throughout, Tom Jordan extensively uses quotations from friends, acquaintances, and competitors of Pre in order to bring life to the stride-by-stride accounts of races.

An appendix is included with times for all of Prefontaine's important career races.



Quotes

"To understand Steve Prefontaine,' [Kenny Moore] wrote in 1972, 'it is necessary to know something about Coos Bay, Oregon. The town and the man find themselves similarly described: blunt, energetic, tough, aggressive. Coos Bay is a mill town, a fishing town, a deepwater port. Longshoremen, fishermen, and loggers are not given to quiet introspection. Coos Bay endures its difficult, elemental life in the woods, on the boats and docks with a vociferous pride. The working men insist on a hardness in their society. Youth must be initiated, must measure up.'" (pages 5-6)

"A strange camaraderie grew up at the time among those of us who lost continually to Pre. It was like the unity of the townspeople in Ken Kesey's novel *Sometimes a Great Notion*, a feeling grown of inadequacy and envy of a man whose motto, in Kesey's words, might have been, 'never give an inch.' We were united in our belief that no one should have the success coupled with pride that Pre had. We really wanted, I think, to see the big tree fall.'" (Runner Don Kardong, pages 20-21)

"Here was Pre, the immovable object, against the faster Ebba, the irresistible force. Oregon's Rick Ritchie led through the first lap before Pre took off, with Ebba close behind. Through the next two laps, the graceful Ethiopian tracked him, and Pre continued to pour on the pace. 'That was a great race,' recalls a teammate, 'because it was a race Pre should have lost.'

On the backstretch, Ebba tried to go by, and Prefontaine dug deeper. The stands were in turmoil, as Pre's people hysterically urged him on. Around the last bend, Ebba made another bid, and Pre took him out into lane three to keep him from going by. Up the homestretch Ebba broke, and Pre had the race in a personal record of 3:39.8. It was a great race, the quintessential Prefontaine race." (page 49)

"Later, as Pre signed autographs for the multitudes, he explained to Blaine Newnham what it meant to run in front of his people.

'I'll tell you one thing, I love every one of them. I've thought about the Olympic Games every day of my life since 1968, but there is a breaking point in each race when you wonder if all the sacrifice is really worth it. You think 'why should I do this? I don't have to run this hard.' But that's when I think about them. They keep me going.'" (page 52)

"The spring of 1973 was Pre's final year of collegiate track. He had the enviable record of never having lost in a distance race over a mile at his home track. There were some close races and some where Pre almost played with his opponents. During the Pac-8 meet at Eugene that year, he was plagued by sciatica, a painful inflammation of the nerves in the back and in the back of the legs, yet defeated rival Ngeno on tactics as well as on foot racing. 'I pulled every trick out of the hat, including making noises so he



would think I was hurting more than I really was,' Pre chuckled after that race." (page 64)

"To attain and maintain the fitness of a world-class runner, three factors must be present: physical ability, mental tenacity, and plenty of hard work. From those early years in Coos Bay, of sprinting between telephone poles and tacking up notes on his dress to 'Beat Doug Cooks' or some other rival, Pre had these factors in abundance. Later, surrounded by very good, even great runners at Oregon, he was nonetheless a step above, and everyone recognized it." (page 93)

"Once I asked, was he going to do it, turn pro? 'No, probably not,' he said. Sometimes he was really thinking about quitting. He had spent so much of his time running. He didn't want to be 'like an old football player who could never die,' he said. He wanted more than a good track record out of his life. He wanted people to know there was more to him than that. That he was intelligent and hard-working and creative. Not that he drank lots of beer and was on an ego trip. He wanted to give the people of Eugene - 'My People' - more. When he thought about his people and how much support they had given him and he didn't want to let them down, ever. So he would keep running, until the Olympics at least. That was his decision. No pro track." (page 105)

"It was a living legend that the clouds went away when Pre stepped on the track. It's really true. The track meet would be going, and Pre would job into the stadium, and in the first place, everybody would start applauding him. The minute he took a step on it, the clouds would start. . . clearing up. The sun would shine through. It sounds funny, but I can remember just offhand four or five times, and I'm guessing there must have been more. I can remember people turning to somebody else and saying, 'It's doing it again.'" (page 115)

"How tough in fact is Steve Prefontaine? When he's ready, he's tough. When he's not ready, not very. Well, tougher than average anytime. It's just a matter of priorities, how tough you want to be. The toughness comes from my training and with the proper training I'm very tough, at home or away from home. My toughness is in my ability, when I want to win, to go out and do it. But right now I'm evaluating how much I want it. 'Actually, I ultimately would like to retire and be able to say I accomplished the things I wanted. I really don't know what those things are yet; maybe when I've achieved them, I'll know. I might wake up some day and say, 'That's enough, I've done what I wanted to do.' Planning and setting goals puts a lot of pressure on you, so I'd just as soon not plan right now.'" (Steve Prefontaine, page 139)

"Of all the procedures to measure running efficiency, lactate levels, and other indicators, none was approached with more aggression by Steve than the test for maximal oxygen capacity, 'the VO2 max test.' This indicator measures the greatest volume of oxygen



that can be dispatched to the muscles during exercise and was considered by some researchers to be the most promising method of identifying athletes with the potential to be the best in the world. A score in the high 70s would place the runner among the world's elite; a score in the low 80s had only been achieved at the time by a few Olympic cross country skiers and other elite endurance competitors. Everyone wanted to do well, but no more than Pre.

'When he was on that treadmill with the mask over his mouth, fire came into his eyes,' Doug Brown remembers. 'He knew how long everybody had gone on the treadmill, and he was just determined to go longer than anybody else. He wasn't even aware that anybody else was in the room.' Pre's score of 84-plus had only been bettered by one or two athletes in the world." (pages 141-142)

"But there will never be another Pre. Never be another athlete possessing the charisma, fearlessness, the warmth of Steve Prefontaine. Never another athlete with sufficient energy to start a jogging club, tutor teenagers, organize tours, or work for the parole of a prison inmate. [...]

'It seemed,' said Rick Riley, 'that those of us running in the meet were only minor performers and that any minute the Star would appear and the crowds would roar to life, athlete and spectator giving and taking whatever it is that each needs and wants. I stood there on the track near the finish but he did not appear. The magic was gone forever.'" (page 157)

"To give anything less than your best is to sacrifice the Gift.'

When Pre would speak as he often did to young athletes at clinics and camps, he would end his talk with this sentence. For him, the Gift was running, which had taken him from junior high benchwarmer to the cover of Sports Illustrated by the time he was 18. For him, the gift was not something handed to one, but something that had to be pursued with tenacity and diligence. Pre acknowledged that he was a good runner, could even become in time the best in the world, but he sincerely believed that many others had been born with more running talent than he; that everything achieved had been due to hard work and always giving his best. 'It made him mad to see wasted talent,' a close friend remembers." (page 159)

Topics for Discussion

How did Pre handle and view his own celebrity status?

Explain Pre's controversial "To hell with love of country" speech in terms of the knowledge you've gained about Steve Prefontaine from this book.

Describe "The Race That Pre Should Have Lost." What was it about the race that many thought would result in a loss by Pre? How does this race fit in with Pre's legend?

How did Pre fight for amateur athletics? What was wrong with the AAU and amateur athletics according to Pre? What was the final result of Pre's efforts?

How can the special relationship between Pre and his Oregon fans - Pre's People - be characterized? What did Pre mean to Oregon track fans, and vice versa?

Describe a typical training regimen for Pre. What was his attitude toward training?

Describe Pre's running style. How does it differ from the more European "kicker" style? What sort of race favored Pre's style?