

## Duck distance star and his rap sessions

# Pre makes it big with the kids

By BUD WITHERS

Of the Register-Guard

Sprinkled among the innumerable track fanatics in Eugene, there are those who will tell you they don't like Steve Prefontaine.

They'll tell you he's too cocky, that he's the University of Oregon record-holder for victory laps. They'll remind you that he sometimes keeps sports-writers waiting, that he was the one who flounced off a track in Fresno this spring with a flip-pant "I'll never run in this hole again."

That image is one you could never sell to a couple of hundred kids at Roosevelt Junior High School in Eugene.

FOR THE PAST three months, Prefontaine has been volunteering several hours a week at the school, rapping with students on a one-to-one basis as well as mingling with them freely in group situations.

"I can just tell the changes in my relationships with kids," Prefontaine says. "I can feel them opening up and accepting me."

It all began early this spring when Don Jackson, principal at Roosevelt, got a telephone call from Prefontaine.

"He just said he wondered if he could come over to school and help out in some way," Jackson remembers.

Today, Jackson marvels at why a world-class distance runner — who also carries a full school load and has a part-time job — would want to get involved in a junior high school.

"HERE'S A GUY," Jackson points out, "who could say 'Phony little school . . . kids 12 and 14 years old telling me what to do.'"

"This guy is about as human as you run into."

Prefontaine explained his interest thusly:

"The biggest thing is I just love people, I love kids."

"Another reason is I had a sociology class in seminar of juvenile delinquency taught by Ken Polk. He stated that if we had some other interest that do it instead . . . I just wanted to see what I could do as far as relating to kids, creating bonds and friendships."

Prefontaine has accomplished that. The enthusiasm of his student friends at Roosevelt will attest.

"I'VE GOTTEN to know him as a person," smiled Carol Pratt, an eighth grader at the school.

"He really sort of likes to be with kids," added Jim Donnelly, an articulate ninth grader. "He's one of the best listeners I've ever met."

"We've discussed quite a few things . . . I'd like to see him as a personal counselor."

Prefontaine's role at Roosevelt isn't one of the star athlete, someone to whom students ask impersonal questions. Most of the time he spends in simple, spontaneous interaction.

Much of that interaction comes in a session called



(Register-Guard photos by Paul Petersen)

## Prefontaine: He can relate to the kids

"House," a rough approximation of the traditional home-room.

At Roosevelt — a progressive school with classes like fly tying, advanced jewelry and enameling and bachelor skills — House is a daily 20-minute session in which 700 students gather in separate rooms in groups of 20 or 25 and talk about things

like drugs or last Friday night's dance.

EACH SESSION is attended by a Roosevelt teacher, who acts as an adviser but usually is just one of the group.

Prefontaine, likewise, is just one of the group, but Tuesday, since he was returning from a couple of weeks' absence, he was the object of more than the

usual number of questions.

Questions like:

"How come, on Wide World of Sports, you were cut out of the race (NCAA 5,000 meters) till the finish?"

And:

"Are you going to represent House 34 in the Olympics? You're probably our only hope in the Olympics . . ."



Duck star and the students discuss just about anything

On other occasions, Prefontaine will spend an hour or two per visit chatting with youngsters who have signed up to discuss anything on their minds.

**"STEVE'S ASSOCIATION** with kids is very unique," Jackson says. "There are very few college kids who have the wherewithal to know what's going on in kids' heads."

Perhaps Prefontaine's ability to relate dates back to when he was a junior high student in Coos Bay, a time before he ever thought of becoming involved in running.

"I've experienced those shut-out feelings," Prefontaine nodded. "There was a time when I sat on the bench and watched everybody else do everything . . . it's very frustrating."

"I had an identity problem. I had a negative outlook toward life."

It was in the eighth grade that Prefontaine began participating in track at a Coos Bay junior high.

"I found I was doing something I wasn't dead last at," he recalls.

**"I WAS AT** the point of giving up athletics and going down a different trail. I know one thing, if I'd done that, I wouldn't be in college right now. I'd probably be in a shack someplace in the mountains, doping it up."

About that time, a Roosevelt student entered, and Prefontaine talked easily with her.

With her, and with the other students, there was an apparent concern, an interest that in a few years, she doesn't end up in a shack someplace in the mountains, doping it up.