

Pre's warning for 1976: 'He'd better watch out'

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MUNICH — I'll see you at six o'clock," said England's David Bedford as he passed Steve Prefontaine in a hallway beneath the Olympic Stadium.

"Right," responded Pre, "That'll be great."

In the moment of his greatest defeat and his greatest achievement, Steve Prefontaine was mostly relieved. The race was over and gone were the tensions and expectations which had burdened him this past year.

"We're going to get together with some of the British runners and the Finns and drink beer tonight," said Pre with a warm smile. "Isn't that what the Olympic Games are all about?"

"I have nothing to talk about," Pre began. "I lost. I wasn't good enough. It wasn't my day."

THIS WASN'T Prefontaine. And in the moments that followed, he regained his bravado, his zest for life, his unflagging confidence.

"I feel a lot better now," he admitted. "A medal would have been nice but it doesn't make that much difference. I know I'm better than fourth in the world, I'm just fourth best in the world today.

His race was more than an hour old now, and Pre was ready to look ahead.

"In four more years I'm going to be a helluva lot tougher than that Finn," said Pre. "He'd better watch out."

The goal is now Montreal and 1976.

"IF I CAN keep up my interest in track and field and find a job that allows me to stay in Eugene and train, then I'll win the gold medal in Montreal.

"They were better than me today, but the race didn't hurt my confidence. It just wasn't my day, but I had nothing to be ashamed of.

Indeed, he didn't. Pre said he wanted the Europeans to reach down deep on the last mile, and that he'd make sure they'd pay the price for any medal they might win here.

Unfortunately, Pre didn't get any help. The first part of the race dragged along agonizingly slow and with every passing lap the chances of the fast-finishing Finns improved.

"I kept wondering why one of those guys wouldn't take it," said Pre. "They were just setting it up for (Lasse) Viren.

"WHEN WE WENT by the two-mile in 8:52 I knew I was in trouble. It was disillusioning that nobody would go out."

With one mile left, Pre took command of the race. The pack began to spread out behind and it was now a five-man race, Pre, Viren, Emiel Puttemans, Mohammad Gammoudi and Ian Stewart.

Viren took first with two laps to go but

Pre began kicking with 600 yards left and it was strictly three men — Pre, Viren and Gammoudi, in the final 200 yards.

"I made a move with 330 yards left but somebody cut me off," explained Pre. "I made it again coming off the turn with 180 yards to go and the same thing happened. I think it was Gammoudi. It took a lot out of me to accelerate and then fell back. If I'd gotten by in the backstretch I might have finished first or second."

Pre estimated his last mile at 4:06 or 4:07. It was sufficient to break up pack. It also broke Pre.

"I didn't have anything left the last 50 meters and that means I ran a hard mile. I made those son-of-a-guns run that last mile. Maybe I could have run a faster time if I'd have held back, but I was running to win."

PRE HAD finished fourth in the Olympic Games 5,000 meters, a gasping stride

away from the bronze medal and Olympic fame.

At first, Pre was stunned. He hadn't lost an important race since 1970. He had issued a challenge to the Europeans and they had answered loudly.

Finland's Viren, an indestructible winner in the 10,000 meters, held off Pre on the last lap to win the 5,000 in 13:26.4.

And in that last gap, defending champion Gammoudi (13:27.40) had gotten past Pre as had England's Stewart in the final few yards.

Pre had run 13:28.4, not fast enough for a medal but faster than international stars Emiel Puttemans, Harold Norpoth, Ian McCafferty, David Bedford and Juha Vaatoinen could manage in the final.

PERHAPS PRE had an excuse for not holding on to the bronze medal in the drive for the tape. He was nursing a large spike wound just above his ankle.

"I got the heel spiked out of me just

three laps out," he said. "I'm not using it as an excuse but the hole in my leg is an inch and a half long and an eighth of an inch deep. It affects some of the movement of my foot."

He limped badly as he jogged around the warmup track adjacent to the stadium. He chatted with Stewart and Bedford.

Later, he held up one of his track shoes that had been ripped from a spike.

"I thought it was supposed to be a race," he said. "It was really rugged out there. Those are my first battle wounds, I'd never been spiked before."

As the race developed, it was obvious that a large American delegation was there to cheer for Prefontaine. On the backstretch and on the final turn, large Go Pre signs hung over the railing.

"Sure, I saw them," he said. "And what I liked was that they left up the signs even after I'd lost . . . that shows you what kind of fans they are.