

1973

Pre's last Duck-waddle

UCLA won the Pac-8 meet and Steve Prefontaine ended his college career at Eugene, Ore. with home folks cheering and a love affair intact

There have been more sentimental moments in sport and farewell performances worth louder raves, but what the fans in Eugene, Ore. got last Saturday was just about right: a suitably happy ending to a long love affair. The occasion was the Pacific-8 Conference track and field championship in which Steve Prefontaine ran his last major collegiate race in front of his hometown fans.

On the scoreboard UCLA continued its dominance, winning the meet with a conference-record total of 156 points. Prefontaine, laboring with a pinched sciatic nerve that made him feel as if his *gluteus maximus* had been worked over by a sadistic field-goal kicker, won the three-mile run for the fourth year in succession, and the 11,000 faithful responded with lusty affection.

The mutual admiration between Pre and his Eugene fans is a longtime thing at Oregon's Hayward Field, where he has never lost to anyone but a teammate. "You have to recognize that track is a way of life here in Eugene," says Mayor Les Anderson, whose son Jon won the Boston Marathon last month. "Pre pen-

etrates beyond the track and into the crowd. Some athletes win a race and afterward they're poker-faced. Pre's expression is 'You helped me win it.'"

Such a demonstration followed his victory over John Ngeno, a Washington State import from Kenya who had won the six-mile run the day before. Heading down the stretch, ahead by 50 yards, Prefontaine acknowledged the stands with a triumphant arm salute as a "Go Pre!" chorus greeted his sprint to the tape. Moments later track announcer Wendy Ray said, "Thanks for the good times, Pre."

By Prefontaine's standards, however, his 13:10.4 victory did not qualify as such, even though the mark shattered the old meet record of 13:12.8 set by Gerry Lindgren in 1966. Healthier, Prefontaine might have ended his days as an Oregon Duck with a U.S. record or something better. If that seems mere speculation, consider what wonders he has worked already in his senior season.

At Bakersfield in March, almost on a whim, Prefontaine ran the six miles for the second time in his career. Unfamiliarity may explain why he comfortably

set a pace that probably left a contrail. When the race ended, he had a new American and collegiate record of 27:09.4—the fourth best on the alltime list. Back home for a four-team meet on April 14, he ran the finest distance double in history, touring the mile in 3:56.8 and the three mile in 13:06.4. Two weeks later he recorded his best mile, 3:55, again on his home track. This season has also produced an 8:31.8 two mile which, like the others, is best in the nation.

Unfortunately for showmanship and for Oregon's slim title hopes, Prefontaine suffered his painful back problem three weeks before the conference meet. "I have thought about it being my last race in Eugene as part of the Oregon-team," he said earlier in the week. "I'd sure like to do something great for the fans. But right now I'm not as fit as I was a couple weeks ago. I also wanted to double, but it's going to be hard enough just to run the three mile now. I can't relax, and relaxation is the key to running."

"I feel good that I won," Prefontaine said afterward. "It was a fun race. I did a lot of things I normally don't do, like saying things and making noises to make Ngeno think I was hurting more than I really was."

As for the fans, he said, "I kind of looked up at the crowd and a lot of races went through my mind. There have been some great ones here. They've given me a lot and I hope I've given them a lot in the last four years. But time goes and you've got to go with it."

Time, as even devouts from Eugene agree, has mellowed Prefontaine. During his tenure at Oregon he has changed appreciably from the brash, often-inconsiderate freshman who arrived there in 1969. Indeed, Prefontaine grew up as a fighter, a trait that has served him well in track, but that, in social situations or press conferences, has often rubbed people the wrong way.

"I feel very confident now talking in front of people," he says, "and I think I've learned to talk with the press. I used to say 'Hey, man, what kind of a stupid question is that?' to a newspaperman asking me heavy things right after a race when I'm still in an emotional state. Now I at least try to answer. I think I've learned a lot of things. If I had gotten this injury as a freshman, I would have panicked and thought my career was over. I proved to myself after the Olympics [where he finished fourth in the 5,000



RUNNING HURT, PREFONTAINE WHIPPED WASHINGTON STATE'S NGENO AT THREE MILES

meters] that I could come back stronger than ever. Even with an injury, I'm running better than I ever have. Before, when I did something good in a race, I'd be satisfied that I was working toward becoming better. Now I realize afterward that I'm capable of better things. Like after the 3:55 mile. I thought to myself, 'I know I can run 3:50.' "

What does fire Prefontaine's oldtime wrath, however, is the casual attitude of big-time sport that makes the athlete's problems a last consideration. Next month's NCAA track championship is a case in point. Because of television, the finals in several distance races will be held on Saturday afternoon, just when Baton Rouge's weather can be expected to be at its sultry, muggy worst.

"The site isn't what's so bad," Prefontaine says, "but if things aren't done right, the meet is Mickey Mouse. I don't care about being on television. It's going to be uncomfortable for the distance runners. Why can't they run those races in the evening? I don't like it."

How much farther Prefontaine goes in track beyond the NAAs and a summer tour of Europe would now seem to rest with those fine, applauding folk in Eugene, especially if they want to keep the Prefontaine act at Hayward Field. "The big step in my future is graduation," he says, "and then finding a job that will let me continue my athletic career. I need a job that will allow me the flexibility to train, take time off for competition and still support myself. If I can't find that, it's going to be hard. My best years as a distance runner are ahead of me. I'm only 22, but things have to go right if I'm going to continue."

As for the UCLA Bruins, almost everything went right for them at Eugene except, ironically, the best field event of the meet. Ironic because UCLA's "track" title, the Bruins' fourth in the last five years, was ensured by an 86-point performance in the field events. USC, scoring 73 points in the track events, was runner-up with 111, while Oregon scored 100 for third.

In the long jump, however, USC's Randy Williams, with the aid of a good-luck teddy bear named Snorky and a capricious wind, avenged his loss earlier in the season to UCLA's James McAlister. McAlister opened the competition with a wind-aided leap of 26' 9 1/4". Then Williams, the Olympic champion, did the same without a breeze for a new meet

record. But that was nothing. On his second jump Williams went with the wind to soar 27' 9".

"That teddy bear is something else," McAlister groaned. "It must carry three extra feet in it. I was really hoping he would make it competitive. I wanted him to get out there around 27' 2" and I was saying, 'Come on, Randy, come on, 27 feet.' Then I saw that 27' 9" and said, 'Oh man, that finishes that!'" All in all, the Williams-McAlister rivalry is among the most pleasant in sport, since it accurately reflects the admirable personalities of the two L.A. leapers.

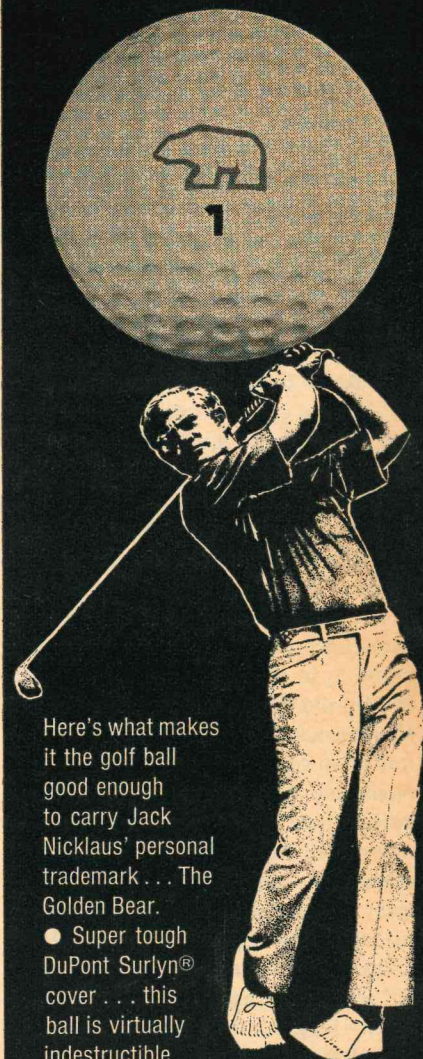
The Bruins should win the NCAA, too, perhaps with even less trouble than they got from their Pac-8 peers, who competed well but could not match UCLA's depth. Both USC and Oregon State beat UCLA in first places 5-4, but there was scoring for six places and the Bruins were just too much.

One of the best track performances was turned in by California's Rick Brown, a defending champ who took the 880 with a 1:46.7—his lifetime best and second best in the U.S. this year. Another outstanding effort came from Oregon's Mac Wilkins, who won a weight double for the first time in conference history. On Friday he improved his life best outdoors in the shotput by almost four feet when he got off a toss of 63' 7". In the discus the next afternoon, he won with a meet-record throw of 199' 9". In the mile, Oregon State's Hailu Ebba, an Ethiopian, shattered the meet record with a 3:57.9 that beat Oregon's Knut Kvalheim by an eyelash. In the same race Oregon's Mark Feig became the 12th Duck in history to break the four-minute mark; his time was 3:59.5. Washington State registered something of a surprise by outscoring Oregon 59-35 in distance events, but parochial feelings were salved when Craig Brigham, a 19-year-old freshman, won the decathlon with 7,673 points, the nation's second-best collegiate mark this year.

No one, however, was cheered louder than Prefontaine, and it remains to be seen if his farewell is going to be something more than merely changing uniforms.

One Pac-8 official did not think so. "That scene will be repeated many times," he said. "He may be running for the Oregon Track Club or somebody, but he hasn't finished satisfying all the ids and egos in those stands." **END**

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