



# Hot dog or hero?

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**NOBODY ASKED ME** to pick Oregon's athlete of the year for 1971.

In fact, if they had I should only get four-twelfths of a vote because I've only been on the Oregon scene since September.

Occasionally, however, an athlete transcends state boundaries. He becomes, so to speak, federal property.

I remember the first time I met Steve Prefontaine.

It was in the recreation hall of a dormitory on the University of California campus in Berkeley.

Steve had just appeared out of an elevator. I was there waiting for him. He reluctantly granted me an interview.

"I've got to work out in a few minutes," he said brusquely. Indeed, he was preparing for his 5,000-meter showdown with the Russians in last summer's U.S.-Russian meet at Berkeley's Edwards Stadium.

Pre strolled into the dorm, his head cocked to the side in that ultra-confident manner which best depicts his style rounding the curves at Hayward Field.



**'PRE'**

Pre is a lion stalking a wildebeest. The time of kill may be in doubt, but not the outcome.

He struck me down with one, quick blow.

"I'm not talking to reporters any more," he said. "I've decided that I'd better keep my mouth shut around newspaper people."

Steve Prefontaine not talking is like Steve Prefontaine not running. You'd have to break both legs and sever the vocal cords to slow him down.

I asked about his race strategy for the Russians, about the nuances of distance running.

**HIS EYES TWINKLED.** He leaned back against the edge of a fireplace and started talking about Harold Norporth and Michel Jazy, two great European runners he's studied. Then I stopped him.

"I thought you weren't going to talk to sports writers any more?" I said, proud as punch I'd gotten him to talk.

"You haven't asked any stupid questions yet," he answered in retort. Pre had passed me in the stretch after I held a brief lead.

And so it was for every other long distance runner who dared match him last season.

Prefontaine ground through the 1971 season unbeaten at any distance over one mile. He won the NCAA and AAU three-mile championships.

Then he scored his first international victory in Berkeley, running down the Russians at 5,000 meters. He conquered the Africans in Durham, N.C., at 5,000 and, finally, finished off the track season by winning the Pan-American Games 5,000 meters.

A notable postscript to his track season was the impressive victory he scored this fall in the NCAA cross country championships, outdueling Minnesota's Garry Bjorklund in 35 degree weather in Knoxville, Tenn.

More importantly, Pre helped his Oregon team to their first cross country championships.

**THE MAN IS** more than just a name atop statistical rankings in Track and Field News.

You must understand that he was a runner who after his team finished second in the Pac-8 cross-country championships, told the world he wasn't going to defend his NCAA title unless the entire Oregon team was allowed to compete.

Cross country Coach Bill Dellinger made a pitch to UO Athletic Director Norv Ritchey. Norv said okay, the Ducks went, Pre won his second straight title and Oregon the team championship.

Prefontaine will forever live in that gray area, somewhere between hero and hot dog.

Any athlete who bathes in the tribute of a victory lap and tells sports writers exactly what he thinks in candid terms, is likely to alienate a good portion of the sporting world.

I like Steve Prefontaine. He's honest and he's sincere. And he's good for track and field, a sport which has needed personalities which would help take it away from the proprietary grasp of the track nuts.

**PRE HAS DONE** that. He's become a national figure, a Joe Namath of track and field, if you will.

It is appropriate that Eugene, finally growing into its claim as track and field capital of the world, has its own hero.

In the upcoming year of NCAA championships and Final Olympic Trials in Eugene, Prefontaine will rank with clean air and open spaces as the things Oregonians brag most about.

Pre may complete the year by winning the gold medal in Munich. Even if he doesn't, his impact will forever remain on the state of Oregon and the year Eugene was king for a day in track and field.

**ABOUT THE OLYMPIC TRIALS . . .** Ted Bush, a 1946 UO graduate, has been hired to co-ordinate activities for the final trials in Eugene . . . The dates have been set: the trials will start Thursday, June 29 and end Sunday, July 9, Monday, July 3, is an off day and the decathlon will be the only event contested on Tuesday, July 4, and Wednesday, July 5. Eighteen of the 21 final events will be held on the four weekend days, Saturday and Sunday, July 1-2, and Saturday and Sunday, July 8-9. Ticket applications won't be mailed until late February. Preliminary ticket prices call for \$6 reserved seating for Saturday and Sunday of each week, and \$3 for all other days. The committee is also working on a 10-day season ticket for under \$35.