



# Pre's year ends early

By **BLAINE NEWNHAM**  
Register-Guard Sports Editor

**THERE HE WAS**, strolling lazily through the Mall with just the slight suggestion of a limp.

Steve Prefontaine smiled warmly as he hailed me. He looked more than just a little glad to be home.

"I just packed by bags and came home," he said. "I've got some pride left. I at least wanted to be ready to lose.

"I wasn't at my best, I wasn't getting any help from the AAU doctors, so I left."

Pre didn't exactly tell anybody he was leaving.

"I really wanted to run in Russia, especially against Rashid Sharafyedinov," he continued. "But I'm a guy running without any weapons. I can't win. So I told them (the coaches) after Munich that I'd go to Belgium, and if I didn't feel better I'd go home.

"I paid my own way. I can do what I want."

You might have expected Pre to be trying to drown himself in the fountain. He had less success invading Europe than Napoleon had in Russia.

In the four weeks that he was there, Pre lost nine of 10 races. Knowing Pre and his competitive burn, you thought he might still be smoldering.



**PREFONTAINE**

And, yet, he showed a developing sense of humor, and of humility from the experience.

"I had to have the experience," he said, "if I want to be the best. I think it will make me a better runner and a better person."

Pre had turned rather philosophical. Perhaps defeat does that.

**"YOU'VE GOT TO** go over there and find out what you're up against. It is something like an experiment. Then you come back and put the pieces together."

Right now, as the American team leaves Italy and gets ready for its showdown with the Russians minus its best distance runner, that best distance runner is home in his Springfield trailer court.

"I won't do anything for the next week or so," he said. "Maybe a little swimming; but no running. I want to get well."

Prefontaine divides his 1973 season in two parts. The first was an exciting, promising period in March and early April when he set an American six-mile record of 27:09.4 and then turned in the incredible 3:56.8-13:06.4 mile-three mile double against UCLA.

Then there was the night he was warming up for the first Twilight meet. It was cold, and he felt stiffness in his back.

Pre surged to a 3:55 mile that night but was thoroughly miserable a week later in winning the three-mile against Oregon State. He didn't train the next two weeks and was unable to double in the Pac-8 meet.

The problem was diagnosed as a pinched sciatic nerve in his back. The second half of the season began there.

"The race in Munich (against West Germany) really bothered me," said Pre. "I ran the first 3,000 meters in 8:02 and I was feeling just great. It was at that point that I wanted to bear down.

"Later the coaches told me they could see me start to tighten up. It was funny. I wanted to step up the pace, but I couldn't. I wasn't tired, but I couldn't go any faster. When the race was over it only took me five minutes or so to recover."

**IN THAT RACE**, 30-year-old Harald Norpoth ran down Pre in the final lap to win in 13:20.5 to Pre's 13:23.8. Like his other losses, Pre was beat with the final kick.

It was not in the final lap, however, that Pre lost the race.

"My race in the 5,000 is in the last five laps," he said. "I've got to run the last mile in 4:08. I couldn't do that. When I'd start to move that last mile my back would tighten up. They knew it, and I was dead."

Even injured, Prefontaine set an American record in the 5,000 (13:22.4) while losing to Emiel Puttemans. The next day he established a lifetime best in the 1,500 meters while finishing 11th.

Even Pre sees the humor in that one.

"I couldn't believe it," he laughed. "I was running a good race but with 110 yards to go I looked up and there must have been 10,000 people ahead of me."

There were only 10, to be exact. That was the race in Finland where a young African named Filbert Bayi ran 3:34.6 while Pre was chugging along in 3:38.1, the metric equivalent of a 3:56.1 mile and a time good enough for fourth in last year's Olympic Games 1,500 meter final.

It is difficult to believe they could find 10 guys who could beat Pre, who had run 3:38.1. But they did.

Once again showing that growing maturity, Pre said, "It was exciting. Everybody was giving it everything they had. There was no time for messing around."

Pre seems pleased with 1973. He again was America's best distance runner, and set personal bests in the mile, 3-mile, 5,000 meters and six-mile.

"I was in the best shape of my life, capable of running 13:15 for 5,000," he said. "But I was, for the first time in my life, injured.

**"BUT IT'S FUNNY,"** he continued. "I've got a good mental outlook. I know I've learned a lot, and I'm looking forward to running next year. I feel so much better than I did last year after the Olympic Games."

The loss to Norpoth will live with Pre for awhile, however.

"Anybody but him," he said of the loss. "I'll be back."

The 1974 season will be different for Prefontaine. No longer must he get ready for a dual meet in April.

"I'm going to prepare myself to run in Europe," he said. "Their season starts in June, and that's when I'm going to start.

"After running four three-mile races (two in the NCAA and two in the AAU championships) and the mile against Wottle, what I needed was two weeks off. Not a race two days later in Europe."