

Pre, pole vaulter steal the show in all-comers test

BAKERSFIELD, Calif. (Special) — A couple of young men named Steve turned an all-comers track and field meet at Memorial Stadium Saturday into something far more significant than it started out to be.

Steve Prefontaine, the distance running genius from the University of Oregon, and Steve Smith, the new star on the pole vault scene from Long Beach State, turned in performances which will make the track world sit up and take notice in the Bakersfield Invitational.

Prefontaine, running six miles for the first time ever competitively, made the 24-lap tour in 27:22.3, the third fastest clocking ever turned in by an American, and became the 11th fastest six-miler in world history.

Smith, winding up the meet at dusk, cleared 16-6 and 17 feet on his first two vaults, then soared over the bar at 17-6½, his lifetime best and the finest mark of the current season anywhere in the nation.

WITH THE ADRENALIN flowing, Smith had the cross bar raised to 18-1 in a world record attempt. His first two tries at that altitude weren't close, but on the last one he laid back on the fiberglass pole and catapulted himself skyward.

It appeared at first that he had enough height, but then he apparently knocked the bar over with his chest or hand.

Smith's performance climaxed one of the most bizarre days in Bakersfield track history. What started out as a simple training meet designed to provide a bit of competition for Oregon following a week of workouts here by the Ducks, turned into a high-powered affair with a liberal sprinkling of big names and some performances that would do credit to many established and long planned events.

Consider Lee Evans, the Olympic 400-meter gold medalist, who breezed to an easy 46.7 win in the 440, then came back for a brilliant 44.6 anchor leg in the mile relay.

Henry Jackson of the U.S. Army, the ex-Western Kentucky star, long jumped 26-1, missing the stadium record by one-quarter of an inch, with Bouncy Moore of Oregon second at 25-9½.

Marty Hill of Oregon turned in a 6-10 high jump, Bill Schmidt of Army threw the javelin 266 feet and there were two 9.5 100-yard dashes and a 20.8 220.

But the machine-like Prefontaine was the star of the show, grinding out quarters like clock work on the red Tartan track which he complimented as "Beautiful — one of the finest I've ever run on."

THE AMAZING Prefontaine never faltered. Running in a combined three and six-mile event, he took over the lead after the first couple of laps and had to set his own pace and run without any other competition.

His first quarter was 67 seconds and then he grooved himself for laps of 69 to 70 seconds all the way into

the final mile when he picked up the pace.

With the crowd of about 1,300 on its feet and cheering him on during the last 220 yards, Prefontaine poured it on to finish sprinting, shirt-tail flapping and blond hair flying for a 59.9 final quarter.

And, given some competition, he's sure he could have run much faster.

"The conditions were perfect," Prefontaine said. "The temperature (in the high 60s) was just right and there was just enough of a breeze to cool me off a little. I've been working very hard and doing a lot of over-distance work in training."

But Prefontaine who, despite his tender years is a wiley strategist of the track game, admitted he ran the race as much for psychological reasons as to whip himself into condition for the coming college season and, following that, the Olympics.

"THEY'LL HEAR about this race in Europe," Prefontaine said. "They know what's going on over here. They know what I can do at two and three miles. They know that I've run a couple of miles under four minutes. Now they'll know that I can do a pretty good six miles, too. So they'll have to be respecting me more and wondering if I have any weakness, and this will help me in my races against them."

Commenting further on the track, which was installed here a year ago, Prefontaine said that it was as easy on his legs as any track he's ever run on: "This track's a little slower than ours in Eugene, but much easier on the legs."

Prefontaine was also running the six mile in an attempt to meet the Olympic qualifying standard. Nobody seemed to know what that mark is, but all agreed that he probably beat it by at least a minute or so.

This was not Prefontaine's first race here. He finished in the three mile in the AAU Nationals in 1970, the same night that Frank Shorter and Jack Bachelor of the Florida Track Club set the Stadium six mile mark of 27:24 which Prefontaine lowered Saturday by 1.7 seconds.

PREFONTAINE ANSWERED questions about an hour after the race after getting in some jogging and "just sitting in the stands and watching. I love track and I love to watch meets, but I don't get the chance too often."

Asked how the six mile stacked up with other events he's run in order of preference, Prefontaine wouldn't pick a favorite. "I just love to compete," he said, "and the event doesn't make any difference."

He was recognized and congratulated by a couple of giggling girls. One asked if he would autograph her candy wrapper.

"Are you putting me on?" Steve asked. Assured by the girl that she really wanted his autograph, he shrugged and said, "Well, it's the first time I ever signed a Butterfinger!"