

Memorial honors life of Prefontaine

■ **Dedication:** Family and friends gather for the unveiling of a memorial placed at the site where track star Steve Prefontaine died in a car wreck.

By **SUZANNE HURT**
The Register-Guard

A bitter wind chilled the tears of Steve Prefontaine's family, who gathered Saturday at the rock wall where the track legend died in a car wreck 22 years ago.

But their hearts were warmed by the dedication of a monument to him at the site, now something of a shrine.

Prefontaine's parents, Elfriede and Ray Prefontaine, now in their 70s, used canes to approach the

black granite memorial on sloping Skyline Boulevard.

"I think he would be surprised that he is remembered," Elfriede said. "Maybe he's looking down and saying, 'This is all for me?'"

The track star's sister, 55-year-old Neta Fleming of Eugene, agreed. "I know lots of times he was brash on the outside. But inside, he was very, very humble," she said. "He had no idea the impression he made on people. No idea at all."

The sleek monument was set in the ground in front of the basalt rock wall where fans still leave mementos. On Saturday, racing numbers, T-shirts and a tiny bronze statue of Pre seemed placed in the cracks and crevices as naturally as the ferns dangling from the rock.

Prefontaine's parents tugged a plastic cover away to reveal the monument as relatives and about two dozen others looked on.

The 2-foot-high, half-ton stone bears an etching of Prefontaine's face, an eternal fire in his eyes. It's an image from a photo taken by former Register-Guard photographer Brian Lanker. "Pre" is inscribed on the stone in gold letters.

Beneath his name is etched a heartfelt tribute written by members of a running club set up by Prefontaine 25 years ago at the Oregon State Penitentiary: "For your dedication and loyalty to your principles and beliefs. ... For your love, warmth, and friendship for your family and friends. ... You are missed by so many. And you will never be forgotten ..."

The monument was the idea of the inmates, some who've remained in the running club since the beginning. They raised the money for the base, and Eugene Granite and Marble Works donated the

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monument.

"I think we all like to look back and remember Pre for who he was and what he did, what he accomplished and what he would have accomplished," said Larry Norris, who coordinated the effort with Eugene's Oregon Track Club.

Prefontaine's nephew, Mike Fleming of Portland, attended the event and recalled spending his ninth birthday watching Pre break the American 2,000-meter record in Coos Bay in May 1975. To get to his uncle, Fleming had to push through a horde of children who swarmed Pre for his autograph after the race.

"He said, 'There's my birthday boy.' He put me on his lap," said Fleming, 31. "I was on top of the world that day. A couple weeks later, he passed away. It's been 22 years, and it still hurts."

"Steve was the biggest influence in my life," said Fleming, who sells hockey products for Nike and is the only person in the family who still runs. "Every time I run, I think of him."

Elfriede Prefontaine said the family never expected the outpouring of love that has continued all these years. They still receive letters from people whose lives were touched by their son.

She said Saturday would probably be the last time she and her husband, who live in Coos Bay, will see "Pre's Rock."

The site, meanwhile, is at risk. The monument itself is safe; it sits on a public right-of-way. But the rock wall belongs to the Oregon Department of Transportation. ODOT

officials have been talking about selling the property, which the city of Eugene gave them decades ago when the department built Franklin Boulevard.

Prefontaine fans, including members of the Oregon Track Club, worry that a private developer would destroy the site. They would like the governor to give it back to the city so the land can be turned into a city park.

In the meantime, they're working to find private donors to buy it. "We're not done by any means," said Larry Hamblen, past president of the Oregon Track Club. "You'd have to be almost brain-dead to come in here and destroy it."



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"PRE"



For your dedication and loyalty
To your principles and beliefs...
For your love, warmth, and friendship
For your family and friends...
You are missed by so many.
And you will never be forgotten...

Ray Prefontaine looks over the memorial to his son, Steve. Pre's mother, Elfriede, said it was probably the couple's last visit to the site of their son's death.