

Track and Field



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Liked by his Opponents

American athletes have consistently shone in Olympic events but running, with the exception of the marathon and distances under 800 m, has not been their strong suite. Of course Bob Schul and Bill Mills carried off the golds in the 5,000 and 10,000 m respectively at the Tokyo Olympics in 1964, but their achievement stands in magnificent isolation. At the Mexico and Munich Olympics of 1968 and 1972, the odds against either distance being won again by American athletes were very long indeed. However, thanks to Steve Prefontaine, holder of every American record over all distances between 3,000 and 10,000 m, the United States was a serious contender for the gold in one, if not both, of these events at Montreal in 1976.

But Prefontaine never lived to compete at Montreal. On the night of 29 May 1975, as he was driving back to his home in Coss Bay, he lost control of his car, hit a rock, turned over and was killed instantly. He was only 24. Not twelve hours earlier he had given the world's best performance that year in the 5,000 m (13 min 23.8 sec) at Eugene, Oregon.

Prefontaine, a quarter French on his father's side, took part in the Munich Games in 1972, where he was strongly tipped for the 5,000 m, having put up a time of 13:22.8 in the qualifying round and an astonishing 7:44.2 in the 3,000 m at Oslo a few days previously. As it turned out, he came fourth, the 5,000 m gold going to Lasse Viren of Finland. Prefontaine was then 21, but his defeat did nothing to cool his passion for running, in fact quite the reverse. Viren would have been hard put to beat him to the tape at Montreal. Prefontaine was not interested in tactics and never attempted to disguise his intentions during a race. His opponents knew where they were with him and liked him for it.

STEVE PREFONTAINE

Born Jan. 25, 1951, in Coss Bay, Ore.
Died May 30, 1975, in Eugene, Ore.

AWARDS AND RECORDS

1971: All-America 5,000 m champion
1972 OG: 4th in 5,000 m
Major U.S. records:
1972: 7:44.2 in 3,000 m; 1974: 13:22 in 5,000 m;
26:51.8 in 6 miles, 27:43.6 in 10,000 m

5000 m of the Munich OG: S. Prefontaine in front of L. Viren (hidden)