

Why Pre Still Matters

THE time you won your town the race
We chaired you through the market-place;
Man and boy stood cheering by,
And home we brought you shoulder-high.

A.E. Houseman "To an Athlete Dying Young"

If you happen to be in the outskirts of southeastern Eugene, Oregon and venture onto the winding and hilly Skyline Boulevard, you may pass Pre's Rock. While the basalt memorial exists quietly among the larger catalog of those that pay homage to the famous who died too young or too tragically, the place is not hard to miss. Within the inner circles and outer auras of American distance running the woody overlook stands sentinel to more than the spot where America's pre-eminent runner died after rolling his butterscotch MGB on May 30, 1975.

The igneous rock marks the death of Steve Prefontaine and the beginning of the long march into Middledom that American distance running continues to trudge. As a cultural artifact though, the site, by virtue of its namesake, has created a different kind of shared meaning; not a specific hope for Olympic medals and world championships but a type of forever belief that the engagement in purposeful and deliberate running; a joyful and orgasmic running; an unrestrained movement across a terrestrial plane is beyond reproach. Pre's Rock reminds us of the way that Prefontaine ran.

It's a hallowed place, this spot, a place of some significance to those that remember better days for American running. They come from all over to leave old race numbers, finisher's medals and worn Nike Waffle Trainers. They leave six packs of micro-brew and pizza boxes. They leave photos of themselves running hard as if asking for his blessing or to prove to their fallen that they had not sacrificed the gift. But they take nothing--their memories of Pre frozen in time, immutable and forever. Like the rock.

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In the course of a sport's history there exist key events, standard-breaking performances and heroic individuals that forced sea changes in the way both fans and participants related to their sport forever after. For alpine climbers it was Hillary and Norgay on top of Mt. Everest in May of 1953. For boxers it was Ali over Foreman in Zaire, October 1973. And for runners it was Roger Bannister's first sub-four minute mile (3:59.4) on May 6, 1954 at Oxford's Iffley Road track. For these iconic performances to transcend the immediate subculture of their sport, to move out into the world and be held in some personal chest of one's own making there has to be something else. There needs to be a connection, a bond between those that do and those that watch, those that inspire and those that need inspiration. Roberto Clemente had that relationship with baseball fans; Charles Barkley touched a collective nerve within the NBA crowd and Steve Prefontaine built that trust with his fellow Oregonians. Pre *won his town the race* through both his undefeated streak at Oregon's Hayward Field and his unbridled response to their support.

For any athlete with a devoted following, it's often what they represent that makes that connection last over time. Hillary and Bannister represent the elimination of physical and temporal barriers. Ali represents a future of equality and resistance to oppression. And bootstrap players like Clemente, who never confused talent with tenacity or opportunity with optimism, represent an unbound determinism and passion. As a follower, participant or devotee, you knew how hard the athletes worked. Prefontaine, the confident kid from working class Coos Bay, Oregon, loved his fans not only because they loved him but because as his former teammate, Kenny Moore once wrote, "he loved love."

One of the oft-used themes employed in narratives about Prefontaine's life is that he was America's only rock star runner. In May of 2005, the 30th anniversary of his passing, Nike ran a series of ads that claimed Pre wasn't a runner but a rebel who just happened to run. The tag line on their full page ad in *Sports Illustrated* asked "Where are all the rock star runners?" as if that's what it would take to beat the quiet and complete dominance of the Africans who've mostly controlled the pace and the podiums since not long after Pre's death.

But it's a mistake to confuse stardom and panache with something inexplicable. At least half a dozen American middle and long distance runners have taken to flash and hyperbole in an attempt to not only build their own reps but to buoy a gradually-declining interest in track and field.

Long hair, tattoos and fist-pumping antics meant to excite and entertain have all but failed to develop the closeness that Pre had with his followers. What did American stars and record holders such as Bob Kennedy, Todd Williams, Marc Davis and Alan Webb lack that Pre had?

To begin with, they lived. And this is where any discussion of Steve Prefontaine gets sticky. The quick and dirty reference to other Kennedys, other 60s icons such as the holy trinity of Hendrix/Joplin/Morrison, is at best a non-sequitur argument. Martyrdom comes with its own price and part of it is that you don't get to reap what you sew. But the point is not that Pre deserved to live a long and happy life or even that had he lived, there would doubtfully be the films, books and commerciality that sustain the undercurrent of heroic idealism pervading his legacy. No, the defensible argument is that Pre still matters because he touched something deep and nearly impenetrable within us at a time that we needed him to. For more than the counter-culture, the 70s were a hangover. Prefontaine's embracement of physical culture and his melding of freedom of speech with freedom of speed washed away the mid-decade malaise that many were drowning in.

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To understand the resiliency of Pre's legacy, let alone the foundations upon which it was built is to understand the notion of *jouissance*, the French term referring to an extremely heightened, almost painful sense of pleasure. He was an utterly pleasing specimen to watch run; that thickened-chest and chestnut hair the antithesis of Frank Shorter's lanky stride or Lasse Viren's icy focus. But always and already, in the back of your mind you knew how close he was to the edge of collapse, the pain coming out of his eyes and moving out into the stands as if to ask "is this good enough?"

Of course much has been written about Steve's *run-from-the-front tactic*. But of all the areas within American running that he touched upon, this anti-tactic/tactic is perhaps least understood. Certainly, it was emblematic of his spirit, his confidence and his *love of love*. But had he lived, pundits have argued, a well-coached Pre would've been forced to run along more established lines of European strategies where track and field remains a very popular sport. Had he done this, the rhetoric continues, he might've achieved the Continental success that had eluded him. And with that success would've come a stronger platform for him to launch his ideas on resisting the tyranny and sham of early 1970s amateurism. But I reject that idea as well.

Prefontaine ran from the front because, like Rocky tells Apollo Creed in *Rocky III*, “Men like us don’t have a choice.”

While Steve Prefontaine had opined on the oppression that American runners felt under the antiquated systems embedded in the bourgeoisie culture of the governing bodies--the IOC, IAAF, USOC and the AAU--he didn’t possess the calculating patience nor the constructed regime required to sustain long political battles. While not quite a junkyard dog, Pre was simply too honest and too willing to wear his heart on his sleeve to operate within the minefields of political life. When he was found dead of that single car accident on Skyline Boulevard, he had not broken a single bone in his body, the little British sports car squeezing the life out of him while a solitary passerby went for help. His blood alcohol level was .16, well above legal limits. For Prefontaine though, there was rarely anything to apologize about. Least of all his own death.

Steve Prefontaine matters for the same reasons that John Wayne and John Lennon matter. In a pervasive post-9/11 culture of fear, we need something simple and accessible to latch onto, to embrace within the postmodern fragmentation. Frank Shorter is still a nice guy. But he’s not overly engaging in a crowd. Billy Rogers, Steve Scott and Alberto Salazar? Some of the best people you’ll ever meet. But they aren’t popular heroes in the way that Pre is. And if I could be so bold, I would suggest that they’d rather exist in their current skin and metaphysics than Pre’s confined-state.

Laws of nature do not apply to popular heroes, both real imagined. They move in a world slightly suspended, defining their own time and space. In sport and in life, we need the *Everyman*--the man or woman who wins most of time, loses a few but always busts it out, who plays until the game is over, who dances until the sun also rises. And who leaves nothing on the track.

In that sense Pre matters not because he died but because he lived and raced as if he knew that he’d not see a 25th birthday.

Not to claim that Prefontaine himself would’ve rather burnt out in some athletic, Cobainian exit rather than faded away, growing long in the tooth and short in the stride. But when you consider the reasons why we remember Prefontaine in a different light, if not context than say, Jim Ryan or Billy Mills or Dave Wottle, it unearths the reason that Pre still matters. He gave us what Mary Decker Slaney gave us—a feisty, don’t-tread-on-me mentality. He gave us Rocky in nylon tricot, a human Sea Biscuit who could drink beer, eat pizza and hold every American record from the 2000 to the 10,000 meters. Pre legacy was constructed inside of his core identity not the marketing department. Sport fans know the difference.

He gave us a connection to real people doing real jobs that give you sore necks and tired backs but pay the bills and make us proud for the work we do. In that sense, he was more quarry digger than rock star.

Pre matters because we hope not so much that Americans will someday best the runners from the Rift Valley in Kenya or that indoor track meets will rival March Madness for sport's spring fever. No, Pre matters because along with his accidental, perfect storm exit, he followed his known self. And he followed it all the way into an early grave. Too few are allowed to go down uneasy but go down on one's own terms. The Transcendentalists write about it; Emerson and his Naturalism, Thoreau and his marching to personal drummers. But within the increasingly-mediated circle of athlete heroes, the Prefontaines of the world with their devil-may-care tactics and total embracement of all things living are harder to come by. So hard that perhaps we need to look a bit more carefully at runners with PR front-men and slick shoe deals that promise the Promise Land if not a GPS accounting of our daily runs.

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Perhaps advancing technology and our longing for a simpler existence have allowed a kind of mythologizing of Prefontaine. In a nod to Shelley, we are his creator but his inner drive and *jouissance* is our master. Such is the way of myth. Its power over us--culled with time, peppered by discourse—has as much to do with our need for heroes as it does for the organizing principles they provide. The difference with Pre though, is that nothing is or was fabricated. In the first of two biopics on Pre, the Steve James-directed film, *Prefontaine*, was slighted for showing him sipping a soft drink at the party just before his fatal crash. With Pre, we want to consume the character along with the myth, the rough hewn edges along with the sweet memory.

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Roadside memorials are a telling cultural phenomenon. Perhaps it's simply a way for those who knew the deceased to mourn, to try over time and many visits to make some sense of the untimely and senseless loss of a young phenom. Or perhaps it's just a grand accident. Who can know?

The first time I went to Pre's Rock I was too young to forget and too old to remember. I followed the weekend crowd to the shady autumn knoll

and breathed it all in before imagining the car squeezing those clear lungs of anything left to give.

I could not help but hear Houseman's final quatrain from *To An Athlete Dying Young*:

And round that early-laurelled head
Will flock to gaze the strengthless dead
And find unwithered on its curls
The garland briefer than a girl's.

(This essay was first published in *Peak Performance Running News*)