

Track Town USA: Eugene, Ore., works to uphold its long-running tradition

By Ken Stephens

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EUGENE, Ore. — By the time the women's 10,000-meter run rolled around at the NCAA track championships, it was nearing 9 p.m., at the end of a long day of track and field, and the temperature had dropped into the mid 50s.

In most places in the United States, it would have been too late, too cold and too boring to sit around and watch a 25-lap race. But not in Eugene — Track Town, USA.

More than 5,000 people were still in the stands at Hayward Field. Most, to be sure, were there because they expected local favorite Melody Fairchild of the University of Oregon to climax a troubled collegiate career by winning the national title.

They clapped rhythmically as she passed down the home stretch with the leaders for each of the first 19 laps. They groaned when she tripped and nearly fell at one point. And when she finally lost contact with the leaders six laps from the finish, they were disappointed. But still, they clapped.

And when SMU's Katie Swords raced down the home stretch to win by 50 meters, they rose into a standing ovation for the victor.

"They're plugged into every lap," said Geoff Hollister, who ran track for Oregon in the 1960s. "They know whether you've dropped a second or gained a second."

Baylor coach Clyde Hart said that nowhere else in the United States are people as knowledgeable about or as interested in track and field as they are in Eugene.

Added SMU's Windy Dean, a native of Roseburg, Ore., a few miles south of Eugene: "These guys will cheer for anybody; it doesn't matter. Our entire team has been commenting on what a thrill it is compete in a great track town."

In Eugene, as nowhere else in America, local track meets are broadcast live on radio. The newspaper carried at least four pages of track coverage throughout the NCAA championships. The marquee on every hotel and restaurant welcomed track teams and fans to Eugene.

Eugene's love affair with track and field dates to 1895, when a meet between Oregon and nearby Willamette University got as much publicity as a football game. From the beginning, the student body voted to fund track as well as football.

In 1903, the students, who then wielded more power than corporate sponsors, were so embarrassed by a dual-meet loss to a small college in nearby Albany, Ore., that they went out and hired Albany's coach, Bill Hayward.

During his 44-year tenure at Oregon, Hayward served on the coaching staff of six U.S. Olympic teams and coached four world record holders, six American record



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Tom Shanahan runs past an aptly named business in Eugene, Ore., also known as Track Town USA. Eugene has played host to several world-class track meets over the years, including the 1996 NCAA outdoor track and field championships.

holders, four collegiate champions and nine Olympians. Upon his death, Hayward was succeeded in 1949 by one of his former runners, Bill Bowerman, who is credited with raising Eugene's interest in track to its all-consuming level.

During Bowerman's 22 years, Oregon won NCAA team titles in 1962, '64, '65 and '70. He coached 24 individual collegiate champions and 33 Olympians who set 22 world records and 50 American records. He served as head coach of the '72 Olympic team.

But more than coaching success, Bowerman's off-the-track contributions turned Eugene into Track Town, USA.

During the '50s, he introduced regular all-comers meets at Hayward Field. They helped popularize the sport by giving young and old a chance to compete, plus watch and meet elite athletes.

"It added more fans, and people became more sophisticated about measurements, times and personalities," said Keith Richard, archivist at the University of Oregon. "And it developed the people you needed as officials to run track meets."

Among the elite athletes in those meets was Oregon distance runner Bill Dellinger, who would compete in three Olympics and win a bronze medal in the 5,000 meters at the 1964 Games. Nine years later, Dellinger would succeed Bowerman, coach 51 more All-Americans and add another national team title in 1984.

In 1956, Bowerman arranged to have the U.S. Olympic track team stop in Eugene for a showcase meet en route to Australia. It was such a tremendous success that Bowerman got the idea maybe the city could stage the NCAA meet.

The NAAs first were awarded to Eugene in 1962. The meet was such a success at Hayward Field that it has returned seven times, including this year.

Eugene and Hayward Field also played host to the Olympic Trials in 1972, '76 and '80 and the U.S. championships four other times, most recently in 1993.

After the '72 Trials, according to Richard, "The Olympic athletes said the atmosphere was so much like what they were used to in Europe... that Eugene got the stamp of 'Track Town, USA.'"

Bowerman not only coached and promoted meets but also wrote about them for the *Eugene Register-Guard*. He went to the 1956 Melbourne Olympics not as a coach but as a correspondent.

While there, Bowerman noticed that older Australians frequently were out walking vigorously or running, Richard



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said. After another trip to Australia, Bowerman returned and introduced the concept of jogging to Eugene and wrote the first U.S. book on the subject.

During the mid '60s, he assigned each of his Oregon runners as a coach to 10 members of the Eugene community. Among the athlete-coaches was Hollister, who said the outreach program raised the track sophistication of the Eugene community by involving it in a similar activity.

Bowerman also was an innovator who developed the first all-weather running tracks in the United States by mixing ground-up truck tires with asphalt.

In 1967, Bowerman and one of his former athletes, Phil Knight, co-founded a shoe sales and manufacturing company called Blue Ribbons Sports. That evolved into Nike, now a billion-dollar sports empire.

It was Bowerman who had the now-legendary idea to use a waffle iron to cast rubber soles for running shoes. In 1973, he came up with a shoe with the now-universal one-piece toe that was easier on the feet of distance runners.

The first to wear it was Steve Prefontaine, Oregon's most famous distance runner. Before his 1975 death in an auto accident at age 24, Prefontaine compiled an amazing record that included four NCAA championships, two national AAU titles, another national title at the '72 Olympic Trials and 13 American records at distances from 2,000 to 10,000 meters.

"Pre," as he is known in Eugene, lobbied the city fathers for a wood-chip jogging trail, like those he found so common in Europe. After his death, a 10,000-meter trail along the river through Eugene was dedicated in his name.

Prefontaine's name also lives on in an annual Hayward Field track meet, the Prefontaine Classic, elevated this year to international Grand Prix status.

With Oregon's recent success in football, including trips to the Rose and Cotton bowls the last two years, track and field may no longer be as big as football in Eugene. But track is still bigger here than anywhere else in America.