

THE FRESHMAN AND THE GREAT GURU

Only 19 but blessed with speed, stamina and a canny coach, Steve Prefontaine may turn out to be the best ever **by PAT PUTNAM**

The mile run wouldn't start until 8:30 p.m., or not for another three hours, which meant, of course, that it was time for the good people of Eugene, Ore. to start gathering at the track. They filed by the thousands into the two creaking old wooden stands that flank the University of Oregon's new yellow \$125,000 jewel of a track, and while they waited they ate their dinners from picnic baskets and talked of the university's ex-

tensive list of sub-four-minute milers, eight in all, and they became excited with the prospect that the list surely would be increased before night fell across the fir forests. In Eugene, babies are teathed on stopwatches, and at most any hour from dawn until well past dusk the streets are jammed with joggers, their wheezing in tune with the rumble of passing log trucks, each perhaps pretending for a moment that he is one of Bill Bowerman's track stars, say a Steve Prefontaine. Ah, Prefontaine! Only a freshman, but the best prospect in the world at two miles, three miles and 5,000 meters, and in Eugene, where track is what football is in South Bend, that makes him taller than the tallest Douglas fir.

To a track fan, little can match the excitement of a sub-four-minute mile, and last Friday, Bowerman, the great guru of track coaches, had come down from his mountain, gathered together his peerless racers and made ready to give Eugene several memorable minutes. It was only an intrasquad meet, but at Oregon they get more first-rate distance runners by accident than most schools get by frantic recruiting. Once a year Bowerman pits his current stars against those of the immediate past, and they go at each other with a deadly purpose. There are 10 events and the fans—more than 9,000 last Friday—are on their feet applauding for them all, but the other nine are only frosting. The mile is the cake.

The true milers, of course, are favored, and this year that meant people like Roscoe Divine, a handsome senior with a career best of 3:57.2, and Dave Wilborn, an alumnus who holds the school record of 3:56.2. This meant that Prefontaine, who can run with anybody for two miles or three, would surely be outclassed. His best in the mile was 4:00.4, highly creditable for a 19-year-old middle-distance runner but hardly world class.

"Out of his league?" said Bowerman, amused at the thought that the confident kid from Coos Bay, Ore. could be outclassed in any race. "We'll see."

This school year, Prefontaine has 1) beaten Gerry Lindgren, his idol, by 27 seconds in a six-mile cross-country race; 2) run two miles in 8:40.0, the third-fastest time in the U.S. this year; 3) run three miles in 13:12.8, the fastest in the world this year; 4) run six miles in practice in 28:20, presumably the fastest in the U.S. this year. Although well above world and American records, these times are exceptional for a 19-year-old.

"The kid is just plain amazing," says Bill Dellinger, Bowerman's young and very capable assistant. Dellinger knows of what he speaks. One of Oregon's army of ex-NCAA champions, he was on three Olympic teams, winning a bronze medal in the 5,000 in 1964, and he once held indoor world records in the two mile and three mile. "Usually it takes guys in our events 12 years to build confidence in themselves," he says, "the confidence you need to win, and here's a young man who has the right attitude naturally. He wouldn't be afraid to stand on the line against anybody in the world in the three mile. I remember when I went to the Olympics for the first time in 1956. I was so scared there was no way I could have won. When I stepped up I *knew* I was outclassed. In 1960 it was a little better, but I was sick so it didn't matter. But in 1964 I was a lot older, a lot more experienced and I knew I could do well. So I did well. But Prefontaine, he's as tough mentally right now as world-class runners who are 10 years older. If the competition is tough or the wind is blowing like crazy or it's awfully hot, hell, that's not going to stop him. There's nothing in running that he doesn't believe he can do."

Fine, but there are hundreds of young runners around the world who don't want to lose. But they do. And so?

Dellinger grins. "Our young man," he says, "is blessed with a cardiovascular system that is so superior to the average human that it is almost unbelievable."

Prefontaine, named at birth Steve Roland but call him Pre, is the only son of a hardworking middle-class Oregon family—his father Raymond is a carpenter; his mother Elfriede, a German



PREFONTAINE LED MIDWAY THROUGH MILE