

WEBB MAY BE AMERICA'S BEST BET

By DON SIKORSKI
Special to the Bulletin

It's been over 25 years since University of Oregon legend Steve Prefontaine died in a fatal car crash on May 30, 1975. Prefontaine, who at one time held every American track record from 2,000 to 10,000 meters, was considered by many to be the next great American hopeful in distance running. Although there have been dozens of young talented runners that have come and gone since Pre's death, we haven't yet witnessed an American track runner of Steve Prefontaine's caliber since. Until last week, that is. On Sunday, May 27th, 18 year-old Alan Webb, a senior at South Lakes High School in Reston, Virginia, erased two of Jim Ryan's cherished 1965 scholastic records. Competing in the mile at the Prefontaine Classic in Eugene, Oregon, Webb moved up from last place in the early going to click off splits of 58.1, 1:57.8, and 2:58.4 for his first three quarter miles before hammering home a blazing 53.9 second final lap en route to a 3:53.43 finish time. That effort bettered Ryan's legendary 3:55.9 mark from over 35 years ago and also broke Ryan's 1,500 meter high school best of 3:39.0 (Webb's went through 1,500 meters in 3:38.26). He would also finish an impressive 5th place overall, running against some of the world's best milers, including winner and world record holder Hicham El Guerrouj of Morocco. El Guerrouj won the race in 3:49.92. The Eugene crowd at Hayward Field, known to be the most appreciative track and field fans in the entire country, rose for a lengthy standing ovation as Webb completed two victory laps, the first with El Guerrouj and a second solo lap. He was later surrounded by hundreds of autograph seekers, searching for the next great American track star hopeful.

Although Alan Webb's record run may have surprised some people, he hasn't exactly come out of nowhere. Entering high school, Webb was a disciplined student, runner, and swimmer before deciding to give up his 4am swim training ritual in favor of the track. His hard work and dedication paid off, when at the age of 16, Webb ran 4:06.94 to break Ryan's 1963 national sophomore scholastic record. Then in January, Webb became the first American high school runner to break the four-minute mile barrier in over 34 years with his 3:59.86 achievement. With that effort, he also became the only high school runner to ever run a sub-four mile indoors. In total, only four high schoolers have ever run a mile in less than four minutes, and none have done it since Marty Liquori back in 1967.

Although pursued by nearly every big name college in the country, Webb will enroll at the University of Michigan this fall. If American distance running and track and field are going to regain the popularity of the Ryan/Liquori glory days, we need someone like Alan Webb to lead the charge. And with his discipline, talent, and willingness to do the work, Alan Webb may just be the next great track star that America has been hoping for.

Racing Roundup

Norwich's Melissa-Perkins Banas was the first female finisher at the Sugarloaf/USA Marathon in Eustis, Maine on May 20th. Perkins-Banas hit the halfway mark in 1 hour and 30 minutes on her way to a 2:57:56 7th place finish overall and a personal best. Her husband Joe ran 2:58:52 to finish 9th place overall, while Norwich's Sue Sucholet ran 3:37:14.....Roger Kimball of Waterford (3:08:34) was the top local finisher in the Vermont City Marathon on May 27th.....21 year-old Tyler Johnson, a former Xavier high school standout now competing for the University of Auburn, won the 1st Annual Delaney Dash 5 mile Road race in Old Saybrook on Memorial Day. Johnson clocked in at 25:39 to better Uncasville's Chadwick Brown (2nd overall in 26:27). 1999 State Open Cross-Country runner-up Tyler Cardinal, also a former Xavier distance running ace, placed 3rd in 26:54, while former Connecticut resident Eric Woronick, now a Secret Service Agent residing in Washington, D.C., was 4th in 27:55. On the women's side, Ellen Fitzgerald of New York was the first female to finish in 29:02, good enough for 13th place overall. A total of 226 runners completed the inaugural race held in memory of Sean Delaney, a popular, friendly, and fast runner from Old Saybrook who has passed away last year.

This month in history

June 19th, 1988 – The Mohegan Striders and the Kelly's Pace Racing Teams square off in the open team competition at the 22nd annual Rose Arts Festival Road Race. Although both teams were loaded with talent and depth in arguably the deepest Rose Arts field ever, it was Warwick, Rhode Island's Scott Mason who stole the show. With the last three Rose Arts winners (Bart Petracca, Ron Cozean, Wayne Jacob) all not competing, the 30 year-old Mason, in his first Connecticut race, took control in the third mile and never relinquished the lead from there. Hitting 5 miles in 25:11 despite the climb up the brutal Canterbury Turnpike hills, Mason remained on pace to better John Flora's 1979 course record before slowing in the heat and humidity in the late miles. His 53:11 clocking placed him 7th on the all-time best list at Rose Arts and was enough for a comfortable margin of victory over runner-up Joe Swift of Cromwell. Dave Raunig (55:04), Fran Houle (55:28) and Pat O'Neil (55:41) rounded out the top five finishers. Norwich's Tim Smith, who had competing in all 22 Rose Arts races, finished 12th overall in 58:07. Although the name Scott Mason wasn't a familiar one at Rose Arts, women's winner Carla Brown certainly was well known in the area. Brown won her unprecedented sixth consecutive Rose Arts race, finishing 78th overall in 69:01. The Mohegan Striders finish 2-4-7-8-10 to claim the overall team title. Despite the hot and humid 76-degree temperatures, 19 runners would finish the challenging 10.4-mile course in under one hour (approximately 5:45 per mile pace), with less than a 5 minute gap separating 2nd and 19th place. There were 410 total finishers.

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