
Prefontaine: The Legend Continues

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Fire on the Track: The Steve Prefontaine Story (1995), documentary, narrated by Ken Kesey, aired on CBS, June 4, 1995, video available from Westcom Creative Group.

Prefontaine (1997), Dir. Steve James, starring Jared Leto, R. Lee Emery, Ed O'Neil, Disney's Hollywood Pictures.

Steve Prefontaine's legend continues to grow in the track community even now, 23 years after his death. Yet he remains unknown to most Americans, which makes the recent rush of cinematic attention thrust upon the life of Prefontaine even more curious. A Nike-funded television documentary, *Fire on the Track*, aired in 1995; *Prefontaine*, a Walt Disney movie based on his life, was released in January 1997, and Warner Brothers is scheduled to release yet another biopic on the late track star sometime in 1998.

Fire on the Track and *Prefontaine* both follow the life of Prefontaine in a generally competent manner. Born into a working-class family in Coos Bay, Oregon, Pre emerged as a track star at Marshfield High School, where he set a national high school record in the two mile race. At the University of Oregon in the early 1970s, Pre blossomed into the country's finest middle distance runner. He finished fourth at the 1972 Olympics in the 5,000 meters, and he held every American record between 3,000 and 10,000 meters when a car accident prematurely ended his life. Pre's brash confidence, success, and charisma made him a fan favorite among the track-mad Eugene fans who were dubbed "Pre's People."

Controversy followed Pre off the track when he pushed the AAU for changes in the amateur system and lobbied for the rights of athletes. He was also on the ground floor of the upstart running shoe company, Nike.

Fire on the Track tells Pre's story primarily through interview clips with friends, teammates, coaches, family, competitors, and journalists. The edited interviews

are enhanced with judicious use of race clips and interviews with Pre. The documentary is entertaining and informative. A couple of problems, however, do emerge.

Fire on the Track occasionally lapses into questionable judgment. For example, Frank Shorter claims with certainty that a phantom second car ran Pre off the road, causing the accident which killed the 24-year-old. But his theory of the still mysterious accident is based solely upon speculation. What is conveniently left out is that Pre had been at a bar and at a party where he had been drinking prior to the accident. By all firsthand accounts, he was not drunk, but the evidence strongly suggests that his driving would have been affected. His behavior, of course, was not unusual for the time period. But this omission is intentional, dishonest, and an attempt to sanitize Pre's reputation.

Nike is present in the documentary at alarming levels. Pre's involvement in the first years of Nike are important but encompass a short period of time. When Pre died, Nike was a small company with an uncertain future. Interview clips with Nike CEO Phil Knight are too frequent, add little, and are an attempt by Nike to wrap itself in the image of the rebellious and ethically pure Prefontaine. This is one part of a larger Nike public relations campaign exploiting Pre's image. But the actual connection between the current Nike company and Pre is tenuous at best. We can only wonder what Pre, champion of the underdog, would think of Nike's well-publicized labor relations practices. When the movie ends with a giant Nike swoosh, the viewer wonders whether they've seen a wonderful documentary or been duped into watching a clever 58-minute commercial.

Disney's *Prefontaine* attempted to bring his legend to a mass audience. Directed by Steve James (*Hoop Dreams*), *Prefontaine* accumulated a paltry \$532,000 in ticket revenues during its brief theater stay. It mimics much of *Fire on the Track* in both content and style. It is filmed as a pseudo-documentary, with actors playing the interviewees. This technique works poorly, as the actors simply cannot recreate the honesty of real interviews. The juxtaposition of actual race footage with images of the actors recreating races is similarly problematic and disruptive. Although Jared Leto, who played Pre, did a surprisingly good job recreating Pre's running style and actually had the feel of a competitive athlete, the other actors in the race scenes were awkward. The actual footage and interviews were more interesting and entertaining.

The movie also suffered from poor development of the main character. Most of Steve's acquaintances claim that they did not know him well. This made the portrayal of personal relationships and the private Prefontaine troublesome. In the movie, Prefontaine vacillates between public and private personas. The public Pre is self-centered and arrogant, while the private image is insecure, bordering on pathetic. Prefontaine is simply not an appealing person in the movie. It is hard to imagine the Prefontaine from the movie gaining the enormous popularity that Pre achieved during his lifetime.

Although both the documentary and the movie spend time on Pre's important battles with the AAU, the movie demonstrated more clearly their importance and risk. For example, in 1975 Pre organized an American tour of the Finnish

track team. He did this without the approval or the consent of the AAU, although the AAU belatedly sanctioned the meets. The Finnish meets, however, represented a direct challenge to the AAU's control of track, and the AAU threatened participating U.S. athletes with expulsion. This was possibly the first time that the AAU caved in to the pressure of loosely organized athletes. The risk for Pre and the other athletes is clear in the movie but appears somewhat incidental in the documentary.

Both *Fire on the Track* and *Prefontaine* have weaknesses, but both are also entertaining and historically significant because in his short life, Steve Prefontaine accomplished so much. It is unlikely, however, that these or other cinematic treatments of his achievements will make Pre a national sports hero. While track fans desperately embrace any remembrance of Pre, the American public, with the exception of *Chariots of Fire* and the Olympics, seem genuinely uninterested in track on film or as a spectator event. The United States has had track athletes, such as Carl Lewis, who were much more successful than Prefontaine but none that possessed Pre's undeniable charisma and popularity. Many in track have wondered if the sport in the United States would have declined as it has in the 23 years since Pre's death if his life had not been extinguished so prematurely.