

The Secret of Pre's Rock

The site of Pre's fatal 1975 crash on Skyline Boulevard in Eugene, Oregon.

The brilliant Steve Prefontaine inspired countless runners—including one crafty, merry prankster. By Charles Butler



Photographs by Chris Hornbecker

One more time,

the two old friends are back at the rock. They've known each other for nearly 50 years—met in seventh grade, soon became best friends, then laughed their way through high school. Along the way, beside rivers and atop buttes, they pushed each other to run faster and farther. Their nicknames: Legs, who grew to 6-foot-4, and Mildew, whose shoes would reek after a soggy run in their hometown of Eugene, Oregon.

On this spring afternoon in 2014, Legs sits on the curb of Skyline Boulevard, a short drive from the University of Oregon campus. Mildew sits in a wheelchair on the side of the road. The pair are partly shaded by oak trees that rise above the large basalt rock. They're drinking Rolling Rock and remembering the hijinks that sealed their friendship, which had ebbs and flows but eventually brought them here.

The stories include the time when they were 16 and impulsively grabbed their bikes and rode to Crater Lake and back, some 300 miles round-trip. They laugh anew at how Mildew used to crack up his cross-country teammates with his dead-on impression of Flipper the dolphin's high-pitched squeal. And then there's

the seven-miler they did with teammates from North Eugene High School, along the McKenzie River all the way to Hayden Bridge, where they all had to jump off the 70-foot bridge into the river, or they'd have to run back. Legs took the plunge. "Oh, man, what a blast!" he remembers. Mildew wanted no part of it. He ran home, seven miles more than his teammates, which was the blast he really craved. The kid just wanted to run.

When Mildew was a teen, two-a-days were a regular thing. As a high school senior he had a running streak of 110 days. In ninth grade, says Legs, Mildew ran a 5:01 mile just days before spending weeks in the hospital with spinal meningitis.

He wasn't built to be a champion runner—he had a bulky chest and was a bit knock-kneed—but that didn't stop Mildew. Sure, when he wasn't running, the kid was a genuine cut-up, the first to crack a one-liner, traits he'd have all his life. But Mildew took running seriously. Teammates called him tenacious, stubborn, gritty. He was, in so many ways, like his hero, whom he shared with just about every teen runner in Eugene in the late 1960s and early 1970s: Steve Prefontaine.

On this day in 2014, though, Mildew's no longer running. He's dying of brain cancer. He's not sure if he has days or weeks or months; he just knows he doesn't have years. The doctors have told him to enjoy these final days, and he tries to. When his wife goes to work and his son goes to school, friends from the plants where he used to work will often drop by the house. It has a full workshop attached. Before the cancer, he'd go there in his spare time and build cabinets for the house and metal works that impressed all his friends. But now, on the days his old coworkers come by, they mostly just talk or watch TV. Occasionally his old high school running coach stops in to chat and reminisce. And then there's Legs. Tim Lewis has been around more lately, taking Mildew out for lunch, sitting in his living room and looking through his buddy's old running diary.

Every now and then, Lewis takes his friend back to the rock on Skyline. It's called Pre's Rock. The two are like so many people who come to the spot where Prefontaine, America's most competitive, colorful, and revered runner, crashed his car and died one night in 1975. The visitors come every day, leaving notes, T-shirts, and racing bibs, staring at the rock inscribed by hand with "PRE 5-30-75 R.I.P." On this afternoon, a middle-aged man and his daughter approach. They glance at the mementos and the dad tells the girl a bit about Pre.

Then Lewis interrupts and points out something to them—an eight-inch-high bronze statue affixed to the rock, its weatherworn patina nearly matching the gray stone. It's a miniature of Pre, with his inimitable mustache, his Oregon racing shirt, and his left arm aloft, bent at the elbow. He looks like he's running, pumping, about to race off the rock and down Skyline to the nearby track that he once packed with spectators.

As the man and his daughter take it in, Lewis points to his friend in the wheelchair, John "Mildew" Miller. "That's the man who made it," he says.

Then the two old friends tell the father and the daughter their favorite story, the one only a few have ever heard.

To kids growing up in Eugene in the late '60s, Steve Prefontaine was their Joe Namath, their Billie Jean King, their Muhammad Ali. Cool and cocky, he backed it up with legendary performances.

John Miller attaching his tribute/statue to Pre's Rock in 1994.



Above: "Legs" Lewis today. Below: Miller running for North Eugene High School and then at Lane Community College.

At the time, Eugene was a city of just 79,000 (it's now around 160,000) and its only professional sports franchise, the Eugene Emeralds, was a minor league baseball team relatively unknown outside the Northwest. But Eugene was a capital of running, thanks to Bill Bowerman coaching the University of Oregon to dominance over two decades at the team's historic home track, Hayward Field. He trained the famed "Men of Oregon," a group that included dozens of Olympians. The city's star would only get brighter in 1969 when Prefontaine arrived on campus from the Oregon seaside town of Coos Bay, fresh from setting national high school records and dominating state championships. Bowerman had someone he could mold into his next Olympian, and all of Eugene could watch the experiment unfold. Some would talk up Pre's unworldly cardiovascular strength. But others—including Pre himself—liked to point to something less mechanical. He famously told *Sports Illustrated*, "A lot of people run a race to see who is fastest. I run to see who has the most guts, who can punish himself into an exhausting pace, and then at the end who can punish himself even more."

John Miller, in his tiny bedroom above the garage of his parents' house on Beebe Lane on the northwest side of Eugene, bookmarked those words to his brain. He had photos of Pre taped to his wall, right next to the poster of Raquel Welch in *One Million Years B.C.*



From his local newspaper, the *Register-Guard*, he cut out a photo of Pre in stride and pasted it to the cover of his homemade running diary. When he was older he would even grow a mustache that looked a lot like Pre's. And whenever Pre raced at Hayward, Miller would be there, usually with his best friend, Tim Lewis, or other teammates from high school and, later, college. They were there the day in 1972 when Pre won an epic 1500-meter showdown against Hailu Ebba of archrival Oregon State University. And later that year they were on Hayward's infield, volunteers moving hurdles, during the Olympic Track & Field Trials when Pre won his spot in the Munich Games with an American record in the 5,000 meters. "It was like being on the infield at Yankee Stadium and seeing Roger Maris," Lewis remembers.

They all wanted to be like Pre. But Miller seemed to want it more. "John idolized Pre," says Tom McDonnell, a teammate of Miller's both at Lane Community College and later at the University of Oregon. It was, he says, "hero worship."

In many ways, the two were alike. Prefontaine came from a blue-collar family in Coos Bay, his dad a welder and carpenter, his mother a seamstress. Miller's dad, Harold, was a truck driver who delivered everything from diesel oil to Coca-Cola on routes around Oregon. His mom, Marjorie, worked as a school cook. They raised four kids, born over a 17-year stretch. The oldest was Don, who left the house at 17 to enlist in the U.S. Army during the early days of the Vietnam War. John, born in 1955, was only 9 at the time. Life was largely idyllic. Harold and Marjorie always made sure John's Christmas pile included sketch paper and charcoal pencils, tools for his budding artistic hobby. And whenever he was off the road, Harold caught his son's cross-country and track meets; the ones he missed Marjorie filmed with the family's 8mm camera. "I was to learn that being a truck driver was a good honest way to provide for your family," Miller once wrote in a letter. "My mother...always rose before Dad to make him breakfast and send him out the door with a kiss and a lunch."

It wasn't all "Leave It to Beaver," though. John's youngest sister, Juanita, was born with debilitating, life-threatening digestive issues. She also caught the mumps, from which John contracted the case of spinal meningitis that cut short his track season in ninth grade. He didn't hold it against her. As he did with all his friends, John liked to tease his sister. He once even tricked her into eating canned dog food. "It

didn't make me angry," Juanita, now 53, says. "It was just John being silly."

Those devilish ways were what led him to running. While playing on a junior-high soccer team, Miller often found himself doing laps as punishment for his silliness. Finally he quit soccer and joined the cross-country team. He told a friend, "I might as well cut out the middle man."

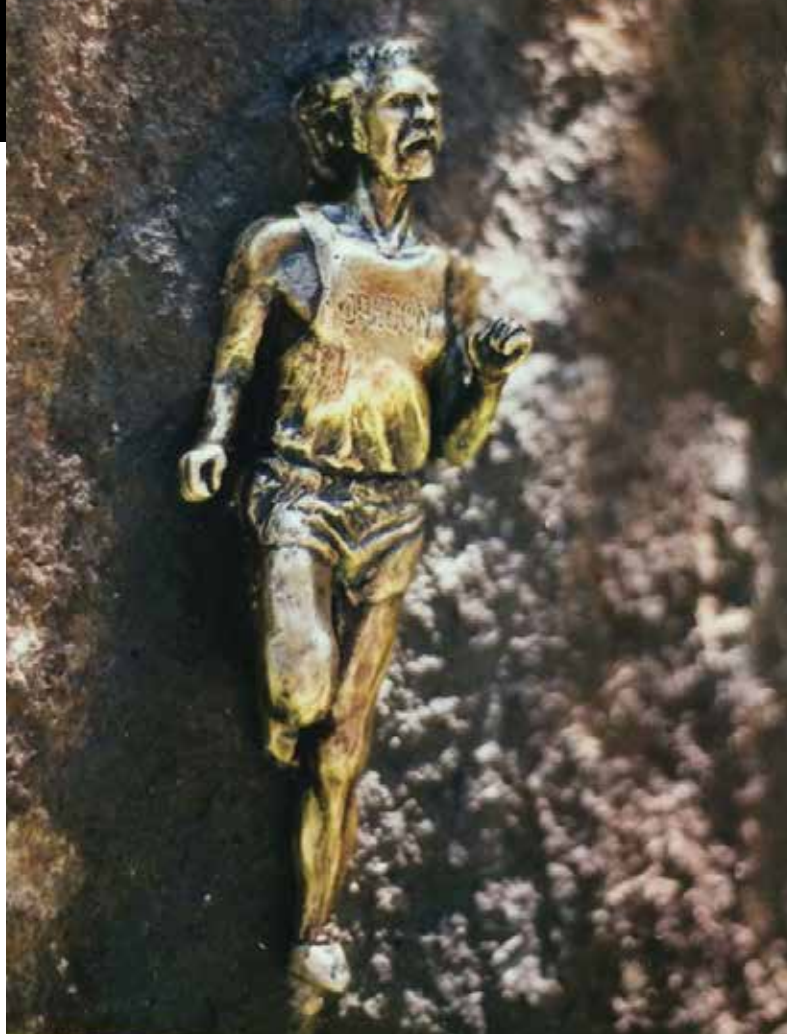
Mike Manley sits at the kitchen table in his home in Eugene, paging through a high school yearbook from 1974. He stops whenever he comes across a photo of John Miller, the captain of the first cross-country team he coached at North Eugene.

Manley's vintage bungalow is just a few blocks from Hayward Field, where, in 1972, he finished first in the steeplechase and made the U.S. Olympic team that went to Munich. It would be one of several national teams he was on with Prefontaine. More than that, though, the two were linked by a fabled race. On September 3, 1974, Pre was set to do a mile time trial with Manley at Hayward before leaving for Europe and a series of meets. But the event turned ominous. At that time of year, farmers often burned fields to clear pests, weeds, and plant diseases following the harvest. When Pre and Manley got to the starting line, a smoky haze hung over Hayward. Pre managed to break four minutes, but paid for it, coughing up blood minutes after finishing. Manley finished with an uncomfortable 4:07.

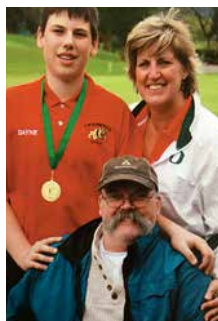
On this summer day 43 years later, Manley, now 75, spies a picture of Miller in the yearbook, one with his dark black hair pushed back as he rushed to the finish line of a race. The coach had seen Miller go from a sophomore running 4:48 miles to a senior nailing times around 4:28. But it was over the longer distances that the kid impressed Manley. Often the coach took his captain out for eight- and 10-mile training runs, an Olympian pacing a high-schooler. "Sometimes I didn't realize how fast I was running," says Manley, "but John could keep up. He wanted to run with people who were at a higher level."

As a sophomore, Miller's 48th place finish in the state championships helped seal North Eugene's third-place trophy. "He had the Pre attitude," says Lewis. "He could grind it out and go to another gear."

"John was fearless," says Jenifer (Bates) Pleus, Miller's high school girlfriend who later ran at the University of Oregon and in the 1988 U.S. Olympic Marathon Trials. "He was very determined, very disciplined." She remembers how he'd often run



Above: The artwork in 1994. Below: Miller at Pre's Rock; with son Dayne and wife Rochelle.



to her house in the dark to get her out for four-mile runs before school.

He pushed his teammates in the same way. Manley was notorious for punishing workouts with serious mileage. Tim O'Malley, a year behind Miller, remembers seeing a Manley workout and wanting to hide. "Us lesser runners would be complaining, 'This is going to be a killer.' Then John would come in, whistling, and get his clothes on and stretch and say, 'Tough workout, guys. Let's get going.' He'd flip the hood on and head out. Naturally, you followed him." And if anyone began hurting during a run, Miller would prod, "What would Pre be doing now?" It locked everyone back in stride.

The early morning runs, the extra miles, the leadership seemed to pay off. On November 10, 1973, Miller, in his final high school cross-country race, led North Eugene to a third-place team finish at the state championships. Individually, he placed fifth, clocking in at 12 minutes, 11 seconds over 2.5 miles. But fifth wasn't good enough, not for someone whose hero once said, "Somebody may beat me, but they are going to have to bleed to do it." That night, Miller wrote in his running diary, "Today was my last cross-country race for North Eugene High. I placed a disappointing fifth. I guess I should be happy, I missed fourth by one second."

Mike Manley coached four more seasons at North Eugene, then went on to coach college students and

adults for close to 30 years after that, a stretch during which he worked with a number of runners faster than John Miller. But not many could match Miller's effort or character. "He was a guy you could count on all the time," says Manley. "He was like a second coach out there."

Manley closes the yearbook. "I thought there would be more highlights."

IF TEAMMATES HURT, JOHN WOULD SAY, "WHAT WOULD PRE BE DOING NOW?"

On the evening of May 29, 1975, Miller was in the grandstands of Hayward Field to watch Pre perform once again. He was there with McDonnell and other teammates from Lane Community College, a two-year school in Eugene that sometimes fed runners (like him, he hoped) to the Oregon track program. He had had a reasonably successful first year. In the fall, he finished 44th at the national junior college cross-country championships, just hours after he heard Pre give a pep talk at a prerace dinner.

Tonight, though, Miller was at Hayward for a meet Pre had organized and in which he'd run the 5,000 meters along with Frank Shorter, the 1972 Olympic Marathon gold medalist. Pre won easily, nearly matching his American record. Hours later he went to a party with Shorter, leaving just after midnight. Pre dropped Shorter off at the home of their friend Kenny Moore. Minutes later, as he came down Skyline Boulevard, a winding, narrow road a mile from Hayward, Pre lost control of his MGB convertible. For reasons unknown, he crossed the centerline, hit the brakes, and slid sideways for 40 feet. Then, according to the police report, "the vehicle went over the curb and hit a solid rock embankment and flipped over onto its top in the roadway. The victim was pinned partially under the overturned vehicle. The victim was dead at the scene."

Pre's sudden death rocked his fans. In Nuremberg, Germany, where he was stationed during a brief stint in the U.S. Army, Tim Lewis got the news from a copy of *Stars and Stripes*. After reading the story, he says, "I went to the barracks and just sat in a chair. I was stunned and all alone, thinking of Mildew, thinking of all our teammates. I started crying."

Back in Eugene, Jenifer Bates heard about Pre's death from friends when she arrived at school. It was the day of the state high school track championships. "I watched Steve run the night before and did not believe [the news], so I went to Mike Manley's social studies classroom and he told me it was true," she recalls. "I cried all day. I didn't think I would be able to race that day, but Mike told me Steve would want me to, so I did."

John Miller was still living at home with his parents. Juanita remembers listening as he read every detail about Pre's death from the local newspaper to his mom, includ-

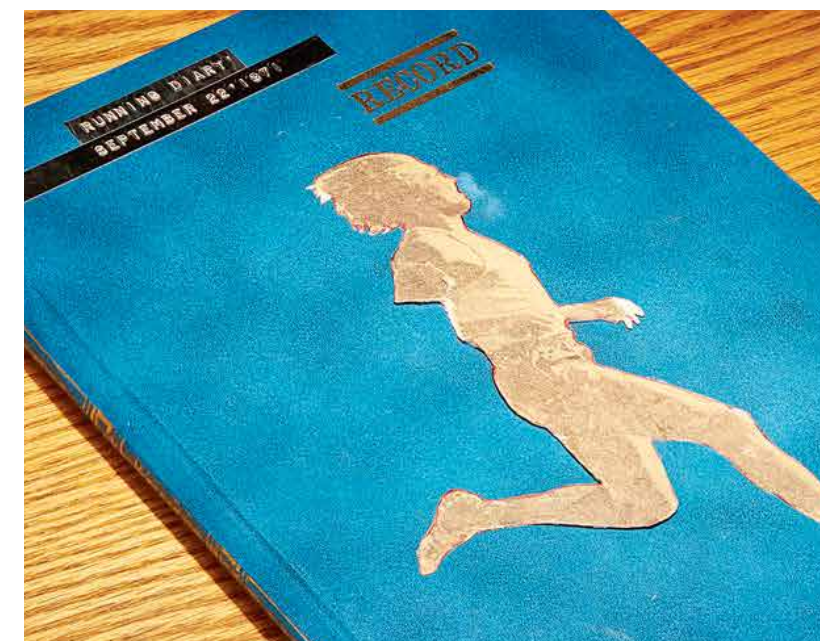
ing the fact that a John Denver tape cassette was found near the overturned car. She recalls how shaken her brother was. "He wondered how somebody is too strong to die and yet they can, in a heartbeat," she says.

Days later, Miller and his Lane teammates were at an end-of-year banquet. As it was wrapping up, a memorial service for Pre was beginning at Hayward a half-mile away. When dinner ended, Miller and his teammates sprinted to the stadium to hear Bill Bowerman say, "Memory of our last great champion will live in his charge to the finish line, his runs through hills and dales. Truly, he is part of the Hayward heritage."

Perhaps Bowerman's words provided the inspiration, or maybe he had a plan in place all along, but shortly after the memorial service concluded, Miller set out to further burnish that memory. He did so by sculpting a work of art befitting his idol—and what that idol meant to a young runner from Eugene.

Even before he became a runner, John Miller enjoyed working with his hands. As a preteen he sketched on scratch paper and in notebooks, anywhere he could draw the caricatures that flowed from his imagination. Later, in high school, he started working in other media, including metal and wood. He learned to make oak bookshelves that friends and family

Miller's high school running diary, adorned with his idol's image.



members still use and admire. What started as a penchant for doodling became a lifelong activity that might have led to more. "John could draw as well as anybody I've ever seen," says McDonnell, who went on to a career in New York City ad agencies. "John could have been a cartoonist or an illustrator. He was immensely talented."

Shortly after Pre's death, Miller put that talent to use.

Returning to Lane Community College that fall, he enrolled in a sculpture class. His project: a bronze relief of Steve Prefontaine. Using a photo that had been taped to his bedroom wall for years, Miller first made a series of line sketches that provided a sense of scale and detail for his intended work. Then, using wax, he molded a figure of Pre set against a flat backdrop. He engraved the singlet with "OREGON" in block letters across the front. On the face he crafted the mustache Pre favored late in his career—bushy with ends that curved downward at the corners of the mouth. He gave the figure motion: the right arm tucked close to the torso, the left arm pumping upward, hair flying. He cocked the head slightly to the left, as if the figure was glancing at a scoreboard clock.

When done with the wax model, he encased all but the base in plaster. He then heated the cast in a kiln to melt the wax out of the plaster. He filled the remaining plaster mold with bronze, and, once it hardened, chipped away the plaster, producing a golden-brown depiction of Pre.

The whole process took six months. When completed, says McDonnell, the relief captured the runner precisely. "It was like looking at a miniature Pre."

While he worked on his sculpture, Miller continued to run, at the same rugged pace. For a while, the work paid off. During the 1975 cross-country season, he earned All-American status by finishing 19th at the junior college nationals. But few honors would follow. He entered the University of Oregon in the fall of 1976 and, along with McDonnell, found a spot on the Ducks as a walk-on. On that same team was a cast of highly recruited and nationally known runners, the likes of Alberto Salazar, Rudy Chapa, and Matt Centrowitz Sr. Trying to keep up with that caliber of athlete led to injury and frustration for Miller. He was seeing little meet action. "The program at Oregon would chew people up, and that happened to John," remembers Mike Friton, a high school teammate who also ran for the Ducks. "When it wasn't working well, he got down on himself. John wanted to be that tough-as-nails Pre-type of runner, but he didn't have the body for it. Very few people do."

After just one year with the Ducks, he quit the team and school, where he had been an advertising major. Any thoughts of becoming a full-time artist ended as well. He put his craftsman skills to use in home construction,

and would later become a millwright at logging plants, keeping mechanical equipment running. He also found a girl to fall in love with.

Amy Sunderland was a high school senior when she met Miller, then 21. He took her to meets at Hayward and told her about the great races he had seen. Though she had grown up in Eugene and knew of Pre, "I had never met somebody who told the stories like John did," Sunderland recalls. "Seeing Prefontaine live his passion was what drove John. He was like, 'I don't have to have two or three degrees. I don't have to be any type of guy except for just the guy I am to make a difference.'"

He also told her about the bronze sculpture. When the two married, a year after meeting, the sculpture found a spot in a glass-framed box on a wall of every house they lived in. "It had a place of importance in our home," says Sunderland. "It always did." Their marriage, though, wasn't as permanent; the two divorced in 1993.

It was then that old Mildew got to work on another idea: a plan to honor his hero in a more public manner.

After the breakup with Sunderland, Miller had time on his hands—time to do something his friends and running buddies say he always intended to do. They believe he began making a second sculpture of Pre, this one without a backdrop. He used the figure of Pre from the original relief to cast the duplicate, altering the body slightly by soldering two small spikes to its back.

By the time Miller had completed the new work, an old friend bopped back into his life: Tim Lewis. Careers had taken the two in different directions. While Miller was working 10-hour shifts at the plant, Lewis was a freelance video producer, going wherever the next job led him. His projects would eventually include shoots with everyone from anarchists to tree-huggers, and there would be times, he would tell friends, when he was happy "living off the grid" in the woods outside of Eugene. But in the spring of 1994 he "needed a couch," and Miller opened his door. For three months they spent hours together, reliving the past and discussing the present. Miller filled him in on Rochelle Blue, the girl he had just started dating. It was a bit like two decades earlier, when Lewis used to go up to Miller's bedroom after a long run and the two would look at stories about Pre and plot their own Olympic runs. "Maybe in 1984," they'd say. "We'll be in our late 20s, the perfect time for middle-distance runners."

One night, over a couple of beers, a new plan was hatched. Miller told Lewis that he had a home in mind for his latest Pre sculpture.

"What are you thinking?" Lewis asked.

"Pre's Rock," Miller replied.

"Man, tell me more."

A few nights later, Miller drove to Skyline by

himself. In the 19 years since Pre's car crash, no permanent marker had been put there—fans just knew where to go to leave tokens to Pre. In a matter of minutes, Miller drilled two holes into the large gray boulder near where Pre's overturned MGB had finally come to a stop. With that step complete, he returned home—and plotted his next move. He and Lewis found a weekday afternoon when both were free, and few people might be visiting the rock. On the chosen day, the two drove to Skyline and went to work. Miller prepared the rock, applying epoxy into the holes that he had drilled. Lewis, meanwhile, scooted up and down Skyline, calling to his friend, "All clear, all clear"—until it wasn't. Just as Miller was about to insert the statue's spikes into the holes, a Skyline resident spotted them. The two held their breath.

"What are you guys up to?" he asked.

They didn't bother to dissemble. "He's putting this statue of Pre into the rock," Lewis said.

For a moment the man said nothing. Finally, he responded, "Wow, cool. Need a hand?"

Miller and Lewis looked at each other. "No, we're good," said Miller. "Thanks." He turned back to the job. Within 15 minutes, Pre was in the rock and, according to Lewis, never coming out. "John knew what he was doing with that epoxy." They pulled out a six-pack of Rolling Rock, sat down on the curb, and toasted their hero. "John was very proud. It was his favorite piece by far," Lewis says. Still, he adds, "you can have a great work of art, but it's also where you put it. Putting it in the rock was the masterpiece."

When they left Skyline that afternoon, the two decided to keep what they had done on the down low. "John never looked to publicize it," says Lewis. Over the years, they told only a few running friends and family their secret. It would be that way until the day John Miller died.

Even when he stopped running for the University of Oregon, when the dream of being like Pre was over, John Miller continued to run. For many years, his days would start with a four- or five-miler. He and Lewis even jumped into an all-comers meet at Hayward one day when they were long past their prime, running the 400 meters barefoot. By his 40s, though, Miller's knees were shot—he would eventually need six surgeries—and his running days were over. But he kept going. He began hiking more and climbing the mountains around Oregon, anything that might provide a challenge.

He enjoyed a life of running, and running around—until that life was suddenly taken away.

In the early morning of October 31, 2013, a couple of hours before he would normally get up for work, Miller woke abruptly. His left leg was spasming. Rochelle, whom he had married in 1996, asked what was wrong. "I'm not sure," he said. "I feel like I've got a cramp or some-

thing.” After a half-hour or so, with the spasms intensifying and becoming extremely painful, Rochelle called an ambulance. At the hospital, a CAT scan revealed Miller had glioblastoma multiforme, a malignant tumor growing in a mostly inoperable part of his brain.

Miller was bedridden for weeks—doctors at first told Rochelle he might not live a month—and even when he had recovered some of his strength, he needed either a wheelchair or a pair of hiking poles to get around. He used them to go to the places he most wanted to be. He made it to Hayward Field, to see the Prefontaine Classic, the annual track meet named after his hero. And, more than once, he made it to Pre’s Rock. On one occasion his brother, Don, took him. He told Don how he drilled the holes into the rock, and also how vandals had bent Pre’s upheld left arm inward, and how he had used a pipe to push it back close to its original position.

And then there was the time Miller went with Dayne, his son. Dayne was born in 1998, when John was 42; by then he’d thought he would never be a father. Like his dad, Dayne found a sport he could devote himself to: golf. He became one of Oregon’s elite high school golfers, just as his dad had become a top-ranked cross-country runner. While he never became a competitive runner, Dayne knew how much the sport meant to his father. Whenever John’s running friends came to

the house, he’d hear their stories about Hayward, about Pre, and about their best races back in high school and college.

Dayne had only been to the rock once, as a toddler, so he couldn’t recall seeing his dad’s finest effort. One afternoon in the spring of 2015, when the cancer was wearing on his father, John and Dayne drove to Skyline Boulevard with Tim Lewis. Dayne helped his dad out of Lewis’s truck and into his wheelchair, rolled him to the rock and close to the statue, now weathered after years out in the Eugene rain. But the details—the mustache, the Oregon shirt, the face cocked toward an unseen clock—were still obvious. “When he told me he made that statue, I was like, there’s no one else who could make a statue like that,” Dayne, now 19, remembers. “It was just so lifelike.”

Four months later, on September 27, 2015, around 7 p.m., Rochelle went to check on her husband. For days, he had been in bed, mostly sleeping, and no longer talking. She saw him breathing erratically. She bent down to him and said, “John, you’ve had a good fight. We’ll be all right. Go see your mom. Go see your dad.” Then she whispered, “Go see Pre. We’ll be fine.” He died moments later, at age 59.

It’s a warm August afternoon and Tim Lewis sits in a lawn chair beside Pre’s Rock. Nearly two years have elapsed since his friend died, a

bit less since Lewis and a few of Miller’s teammates and friends from high school and college came up to the rock and spread some of their friend’s ashes on it.

The small statue is easy to miss; it almost blends into the basalt. For a few years it was the only permanent remembrance, but in 1997 a local group helped get a large granite headstone featuring an embossed photo of Pre and words of appreciation installed. It makes the sculpture seem even smaller, its creator even more anonymous.

On this day, moss and wild blackberries grow on the rock, and there seems to be a larger than normal collection of notes and bibs left by fans. Lewis takes a sip of his Rolling Rock and pours the last few ounces on the stone. “This was John’s legacy,” he says, “this statue of his hero.” He pauses. “John might not have become an artist or maybe all of the things he dreamed of becoming, but who does?”

As he is about to leave, a car pulls up and three college kids get out. They’re passing through Eugene, on their way from Seattle to San Diego. One says she ran in high school and that her dad had told her about Pre and the rock. Lewis tells them to enjoy it. Then he gets into his pickup and heads up Skyline to make a U-turn. By the time he drives around a curve and back toward the rock, the site is empty. The college kids have already moved on. 