

MEET ME IN EUGENE

A track and field report from the this year's Olympic trials

BY SCOTT PARKER



RUNNERS ARE PICTURED AT HAYWARD FIELD DURING THE 2016 OLYMPIC TRIALS IN EUGENE, OREGON.

Olympic Trials, Day 1

Being at a world class track and field meet is nothing like watching one on TV. If you've ever cursed at your screen when the network cuts to a commercial in the middle of a 5,000 meter race you understand the fact of editorial control, but until you've been at a major meet you can't appreciate the degree. Being at a world class track and field meet is like being at a high school track and field meet with better athletes. There are at least three events to follow at all times, plus athletes taking victory laps for events just finished and athletes warming up for events soon to come. Not to mention, you might not even be in the stadium just now but out in the pavilion grabbing a beer or watching your kid run sprint races on the turf field. And every once in a while, in whatever part of the hoopla you find yourself, you might notice your eyes drifting up toward the sky blue sky and the evergreens gently rocking in the lazy summer breeze on the hill above you and letting your thoughts go slack, thinking in the privacy of your own mind no particular thing at all.

Maybe that last part was just me. I arrived in Eugene for the Olympic Trials in more of a recreational than professional capacity. I had a press pass, which I planned to use for its perks, not its responsibilities. Ahead of me lay four days of leisure and intermittent nostalgia for my undergraduate days. Of course, the University of Oregon I attended a decade plus ago bore only a family resemblance to the University of Nike I found in its place. On my way to pick up my pass at a building that I didn't know existed, next to a basketball stadium I didn't know could be imagined, I passed a moated building and briefly—but only briefly—entertained a what-if scenario wherein I majored in business rather than philosophy.



THE BEER GARDEN WAS A POPULAR SPOT FOR SPECTATORS DURING THE OLYMPIC TRIALS.

After flying in to Portland and driving down to Eugene with my sister, Katie, that morning and getting credentialed, the fresh punch of an IPA was just what the moment required. Outside Hayward Field, on closed-off Agate Street, I bought my first Ninkasi Beer Run of the trials and elbowed Katie excitedly to indicate Bob Kersee standing nearby.

My plan was to enjoy the beer and the sunshine and let the day come at me as it would. That lasted until I heard Jeremy Wariner's name called over the loudspeaker and rushed into the stadium flashing my press pass like I knew precisely where I was going and what I was doing. Wariner, the old veteran, twelve years removed from his Olympic gold in the event, qualified for the semifinals in the 400 meter on time. After the race, I caught him in the media tent, where he spoke in warm and generous clichés about setting an example for the younger runners and helping them to surpass himself. Easy dude to root for, I concluded.

Back in the stadium for the women's 400 meter, I climbed up to the sparsely people media tribune at the top of the grandstand and spread out under the overhang. It would be possible to spend an entire Eugene summer enjoying the back and forth between sunshine and shade.

The fans in Tracktown are just as smart and dialed in as everyone says they are. They will cheer so loudly for an obscure field result that they delay the start of races on the track. It's great. That first evening, when the heats for the women's 400 meter got underway, it was shocking to see in person just how much the runners faded down the homestretch. The whole race is about who can forestall collapse the longest. Only Allyson Felix ran the whole thing consistently, the announcer calling attention to her "so smooth stride." While it's true her stride is as smooth as Steph Curry's jump shot, it felt a little at odds with the spirit of camaraderie to single her out midrace, not to mention a little pery in tone.

The only previous time I had seen Galen Rupp run in person was in 2004 when he tried to achieve a four minute mile as a high schooler. I've followed his career, though, since high school, when I missed racing against him in cross country by one year. The allegations of his cheating under the raging influence of Alberto Salazar are substantial at this point, but I can't bring myself to watch his races with anything but cautious optimism.

For Day 1's culminating race at Hayward, the 10,000 meter runners took a handful of strides up and down the homestretch and after quick introductions were sent off to do their best. Anyone who tells you distance races in track are boring is telling you more about themselves than about racing. There's as much drama and tension as any viewer has the capacity to appreciate. Rupp started the race in second and stayed there for about six laps before zooming way out ahead of the field. On the eighth lap, in a scene out of a Prefontaine movie, he looked over his shoulder to see just how far ahead he was. Here he let his lead evaporate, and I got the strong sense that he was

toying with the other runners. Either he was running the race as a workout or trying to break other runners with his changes of speed. After twelve laps he surged again. This time a few runners tried to stay with him. One by one he dropped them—in Bernard Lagat's case, dramatically—and ran on to an easy win.

Day 2

The morning of the women's 10,000 meter I showed up early to stake out a spot on the landing directly above the start and finish of the race. The runners lined up close enough that they looked for once like actual muscle and bone people. I could see whose body language betrayed nerves, who couldn't believe she was really there and what kind of shoes they all wore. It was among the best spots in Hayward and I lasted about half the race there before an official told me it was for coaches only and I had to hike up to the media tribune.

In the field, long jumpers warmed up, barely touching the runway as they glided toward the pit, and discuses sailed placid arcs through the sky. It was a tranquil scene interrupted gracefully then violently by a wayward discus that nearly hit one of the jumpers before rolling out onto the track. The jumper was understandably shook, and luckily all the runners were on the far side of the track, the race not yet as spread as it would be.

Molly Huddle led from the start and was extending her lead lap by lap over the field. Pretty soon she was lapping runners and forcing upon me one of the most pressing questions of the meet: Why do some lapped runners not give up the inner lane of the track? None of the possible answers is encouraging. At best, runners are oblivious and don't realize they are being passed. If they do notice, it's worse: they're willfully interfering with the race, whether out of pride or simple failure of conscientiousness. It happened a lot in that race, and in many that followed. Farthest behind was Courtney Smith of Harvard. She was run ragged, nowhere near chasing distance of the second to last runner. Yet as she pushed on to the finish she met chants of "Har-vard! Har-vard!" at each section she passed. It was the kind of moment you only get in track, and maybe only in Eugene. It was time for a Beer Run.

I met Katie and our friend Lindsey out on the turf, where fans without tickets or fans having a beer (no drinks allowed in the stadium) could watch the meet on a giant screen in the hot sun. We sat on the toxic field and watched the women's long jump, the little black balls of reused rubber sticking to the sweat on our hands and legs. Of all the ways we expose ourselves to toxins, replacing a grass field with an artificial one in the middle of the grass seed capital of the world has to be among the dumbest.

But the beer was good and Brittney Reese was soaring to a new meet record in the long jump, making her the second best jumper in American history, second only to Jackie Joyner-Kersey, who would soon present her with her medal. Back in the media tribune, I was confronted with my second great puzzle of the meet when Jeremy Wariner pulled up in the 400 meter semifinal and accepted a gracious career acknowledging standing ovation from the fans of Hayward. I looked to my left and right to confirm that I was the only member of the press clapping. Why? The same thing had happened the night before when Sonya Richards-Ross had been unable to finish her 400 meter heat. Here were two great champions nearing the ends of their careers, and the very people who had spent their own careers watching them appeared unmoved. Why?

Hypothesis 1: Personal restraint. They wanted to cheer but were duty bound by their serious responsibilities as journalists to not give anything away. Inside they were moved, only

outside were they blank. But were they such good actors? And could anyone's understanding of objectivity be so naive? No, they weren't hiding their emotions. There were no emotions to hide.

Hypothesis 2: They'd seen it all before. This was my first professional meet, it wasn't theirs. This hypothesis gathered some anecdotal support when the reporter in front of me slammed a 5-Hour Energy, seemingly without disgust, the first time I'd seen such a thing. This was a man who was clearly used to doing what the job required without regard to personal well-being. Where this hypothesis breaks down is in the interest these reporters showed in the sport itself. They were not bored, only removed. They knew more of the runners than I did, made obscure predictions and took interest when something unexpected happened. So they weren't exactly jaded. What then?

With Hypothesis 3, I finally got it: They did not understand themselves as observers of the events but as participants in the show, insiders. They saw themselves as integral pieces in the meet's puzzle. Not as important as the athletes or coaches, they would concede, but not ever to be mistaken for mere fans either.

I hope I fit in to this group as badly as I think I do.

That afternoon I entered a cannabis shop to buy weed legally for the first time since Amsterdam. I came out with two joints of something called Atomic Bomb and a mint chocolate edible. I hadn't smoked in some time and the stuff hit me fairly hard.

By the time I got up to Pre's Rock my high permeated my body down to where the soles of my feet touched my flip-flops. Time started to do that thing where if you forget to mind it, it vanishes on you. How long had it been since I joined the crowd here to leave my finisher's medal after the Eugene Marathon? How long since I used to pass by here on runs during college? How long since Pre himself was last here, his blood spilling out over the very pavement where I now stood? How long before when a singular human being became a cultural reference point, an historical idea? It was too macabre a scene, standing there educating Pre's death again. I felt a sudden and distinct impression that he deserved some privacy and I left him to it.

Day 3

On Sunday, Katie, Lindsey, and I were strolling the grounds, leisurely finding our way to the first Beer Run of the day, when the Nike tents' offer of shade drew us in. These three tents were silver-gray hemispheres of ostentatious size and prominence. What else would you expect from Nike? The air temperature dropped about ten degrees as the diesel-powered air conditioning spilled out of the front opening. The thing we noticed in the first tent was there wasn't much in it. Some TVs around the perimeter showing, I don't know, something about running, I suppose. No one paid them any mind. In the center of the tent was a wall, on the back side of which was the history of Nike's role in U.S. track and field told in about five pairs of shoes. It was not uninteresting at all, but it was awfully meager for the high tech balloon we were all gathered in.

A tunnel led us to the second tent. This one featured the Nike Olympic uniforms with the focus of the attention given to about five flowing rows, each row its own color, of about one hundred of the ugliest and most technologically advanced running shoes you've ever seen. We were wondering what the point of this was when a young man not identifiably associated

with Nike told us there was room for three more people in the next tent. Why not? We passed through the next tunnel, and here is where things really got strange.

I turned in the third tent to examine the shoes displayed on the wall but was halted by another young man, whom I could not identify as being associated with Nike, who told me I had to move in the opposite direction and that the event was about to start. The door to the previous tent closed and the lights dimmed. In the middle of the tent, on a large circular platform ringed with outward facing treadmills, the master of ceremonies took his microphone and interrogated the crowd, "Are you ready?" "Are you pumped?" and so on. The three of us didn't know what we were meant to be ready for, but the 30 others gathered seemed to, as they clapped with moderate enthusiasm. The lights were dimmed further as music played and graphics were put up on the inside of the dome in planetarium manner. The MC shouted to be heard. Altogether too much explaining was required of him for what was conducive in the loud, dark environment, but the gist of it was this: a bunch of people would come out onto the platform and run 400 meters on the treadmills, attempting to keep Evan Jager's mile pace that long. It sounded like a fun challenge to me, and from the safe anonymity of the dark room I was pretty sure I could do it.

The runners were brought out and were each wearing the ugly shoes from the second tent. They were given a minute or two to warm up and accustom themselves to the treadmills, which adjusted themselves to the runner's pace, instead of vice versa (thank god). It was quite dark by now and quite loud. Clearly we were meant to think we were witnessing something significant. The runners were ready. One had already discovered in warmups that he could run faster if he supported his bodyweight on the arm bars. The MC was ready. "Are you ready?!" he asked again. I guessed we were. "Let's do this!" he shouted with the kind of enthusiasm that must have impressed his supervisor and earned him the job. Then, looking at his device, he added apologetically, "In just one more minute." The volume of the music was lowered and the whole tent of people stood awkwardly enjoying the air conditioning. Then — "Are you ready?!" — the minute had passed, the music was loud again and the MC was leading us in a 10 second countdown, and the runners were running. The arm bar guy was cheating egregiously and doing well for himself. Two of the others ran impressively and, according to the graphic on the ceiling, nearly kept up with Jager. In the end, no one made it. The MC, nothing left to hype, was a lesser version of himself already. "Thanks for coming," he might have said as someone behind us opened a door to the outside and all the bright light came flooding in.

My synapses were more or less shot after whatever that had been. I relaxed in my bleacher seat and jotted down only the most cursory of notes the rest of the day:

- Really impressive celebration dancing from high jumper
- Tyson Gay looks old—does his beard have some gray in it?
- When the crowd cheers so loudly for former Ducks, does it disrupt the jumpers who are mid-approach?
- Wow! Allyson Felix looked out of it at 200, even 300, great finish as everyone else fell apart and she kept getting faster
- Wonderful moment: long jumper yelling "I made the team? I made the team!"
- Reporter from RunnerSpace losing water bottles, food wrappers in the wind and only halfway trying to pick them up
- No clapping again from the reporters when Otis Davis is honored—what a bunch of dickwads

Day 4

Katie and I got up to run Pre's Trail first thing in the morning. The number of fit people, young and old alike, in Eugene all week had been remarkable, but the kinds of runners we saw on Pre's Trail were the kind you can't help but ogle when they line up in front of you at a road race. Lean, sinewy, and most of them a hell of a lot faster than us. It was little surprise, then, when a mile and a half into the four mile bark dust loop, we saw Meb Keflezighi both casually jogging and relatively flying right at us. When we crossed paths with him again later in our run he was being tailed by another runner trying to get close enough to get him in the background of a selfie, which Twitter would prove sort of worked out for him.

At Hayward that afternoon, everyone was waiting for Galen Rupp to make his move in the 5,000 meter. The way he ran in the 10,000 and the way Hayward fans had seen him run for years, it felt like a sure thing that even if he was over raced, and in marathon shape, he would put something special together. But as the race wound down it became clear he didn't have it in him, struggling to the finish and barely advancing to the final on time. The reporter from the University of Texas, I couldn't not notice, missed the whole thing. For ten minutes he plugged himself into social media, then with two laps remaining packed up his laptop and left the stadium.

The next race, the women's 800 meter final, was a hell of a thing to witness. You think about these athletes, who devote their lives to training for performances that come down to fractions of inches, hundredths of seconds, minutes of degrees. From these marginal differences come their successes, their failures, their triumphs, their disappointments and, possibly, their legacies.

A friend of mine from Minnesota is a big fan of Brenda Martinez and had me rooting for her famous kick. Lindsey is partial to the front running Alysia Montano and I had contracted some of her enthusiasm as well. When both runners got tripped up coming into the homestretch of what looked to me like it would be a one-two finish, it was an emotionally rending confrontation with the fickleness of results. And rending for fans. It was of another order entirely for Montano as she cried out and carried on and collapsed her way to the finish. Her Olympic dreams possibly ended, the U.S.'s chances of medaling in Rio greatly reduced—of course the Hayward fans had another ovation in them, as long as it would take for Montano to reach the finish and then some. You cannot sit idle when a human being lays such suffering bare before you and not be moved to reach out to her in whatever form of compassionate response is available to you. Unless you're sitting in the media tribune.

The meet was only half over, but I had to get home, back to my normal concerns and pressures. As Katie drove me to Portland, where I would catch my return flight, it occurred to me that the name Donald Trump had not passed through my mind in four days. The idyll of Eugene had come to an end for me.