

T&FN INTERVIEW

Vin Lananna

by Jon Hendershott

Three weeks after Vin Lananna became Oregon's head coach in the summer of '05, the university city of Eugene won the bid to host the '08 Olympic Trials at historic Hayward Field.

Lananna and Oregon TC president Greg Erwin became co-chairs of Eugene 08, the community-based group that will present this year's edition of the most important U.S. meet held every four years.

Lananna—who turns 55 just 10 days before the June 27 opening of this year's Trials—already had forged a reputation as a dynamic, visionary leader in coaching and administrative stints at Dartmouth, Stanford and Oberlin.

But the Eugene and UO opportunities gave the

contributions.

T&FN: Of course, it does take the work of many, many people to pull off a task as big as the Trials. But there also needs to be leadership, no? Isn't that a part of what you are, a dynamic, visionary, forward-thinking type of leader?

Lananna: Well, I try to be. Where I see my ability and where my abilities lie is to gather lots of information from a variety of sources and then get people to focus on what our mission is.

It's one thing to have a view of what's going to happen and a vision, but it's another thing to articulate it to those who need to help make it happen.

One person can never do all the things that need to be done. What I have found in this community are so many people who have a history, a connection, a love for, a passion for the history of track & field.

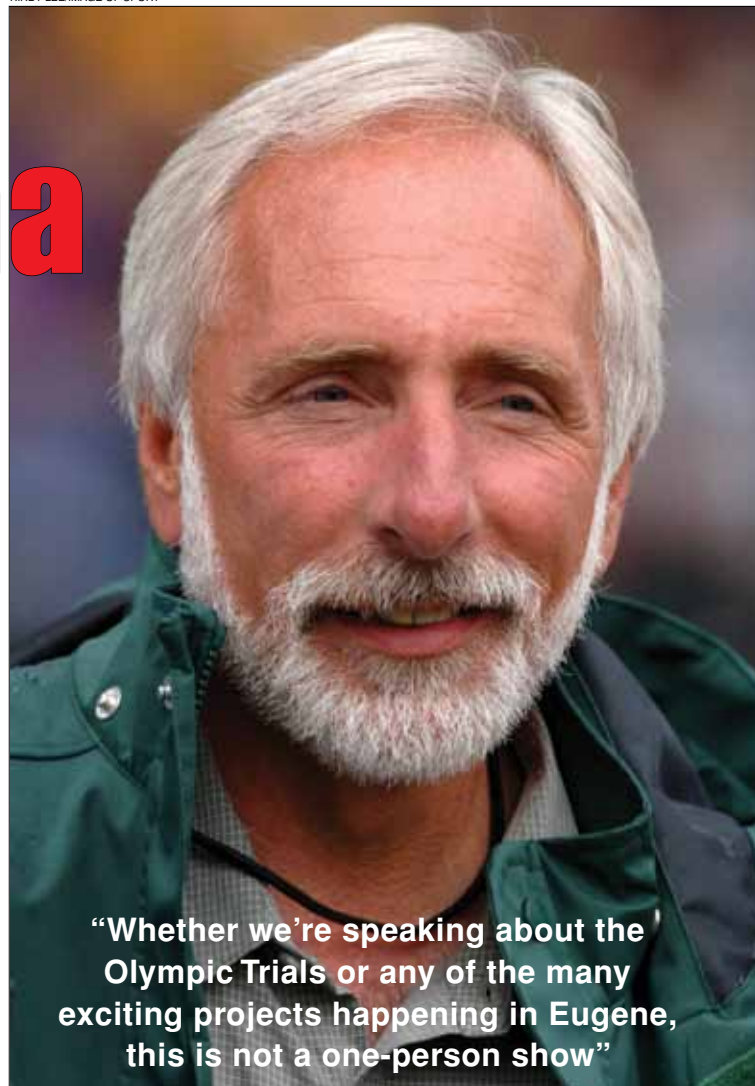
T&FN: And the enthusiasm for track isn't just for the UO teams is it?

Lananna: I think that wonderful connect between the state and the sport, and the sport and the state, is something really special and those are some of the things that separate the whole Track Town (see sidebar) idea—and it just isn't Eugene. It's state-wide, and maybe even region-wide.

I didn't understand that or recognize it before I arrived, but in the last three years I have seen this be the case. It was easy, really, to get people to come on board.

T&FN: How did the University of Oregon attract you?

Lananna: When the administration recruited me, it wasn't about being the track coach [laughs]. I had



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absolutely no interest whatsoever in being the track coach. I had already done it. If it had only been about winning Pac-10 championships so Oregon could say, “Hey, we won the Pac-10,” that was not the motivator for me.

The motivator was to take what is here—a passionate, large group of people who have a sense of pride in this sport and the Track Town Forever idea—and getting it back to center stage. See if that could really be a catalyst for the whole sport.

In order to do that, of course, one of the objectives is that you have to have a good university program. As a result, that's what

The OT Has Far-Reaching Import

So why is track so relevant in Eugene? Vin Lananna's analysis:

“The sport is important not just to the University of Oregon or to Eugene, but to the entire state of Oregon.

“There are the obvious historical elements: the electrifying charisma of Steve Prefontaine; the start of the U.S. running boom after Bill Bowerman brought jogging back from his trip to New Zealand; the Olympic Trials in '72, '76 and '80; the legacy of American and World Records at Hayward Field; and, of course, the birth of Nike and the ensuing revolution in sports culture with a simple handshake between Phil Knight and Bowerman.

“In my short time here, I've met with government and corporate leaders at every level, and each has a story about some meaningful personal experience with track & field: watching Pre race, working with Bowerman on a community project, or volunteering at one of the previous Olympic Trials.

“Because of all these special ties to track, we're on the brink of a collaborative effort never seen before in our sport, where the University of Oregon's academic and athletic departments, USATF, city/county/state agencies, Oregon's travel and tourism boards, private donors and corporate partners can form a true partnership to radically impact our sport.”

C.W. Post/LIU grad enormous chances to initiate wide-ranging programs that will affect many people in and out of the sport, on local, state and even national levels. Those have always been his aims.

He started our talk with a self-effacing comment:

Lananna: I must emphasize that, whether we're speaking about the Olympic Trials or any of the many exciting projects happening in Eugene, this is *not* a one-person show. We're engaged in a community-wide undertaking and many, many people are making significant

The Track Capital Of Lane County

For years, Eugene has been billed as “Track Town USA.” There is even a Track Town Pizza near storied Hayward Field. A more recently-used moniker for the city is “Track Town Forever.”

Vin Lananna says: “As the Trials come closer, and with the hundreds of volunteers who have worked on the Trials, there's lots of discussion about ‘Track Town.’ But it's one thing for the city of Eugene to call itself ‘Track Town’ and it's another thing for everyone else to call us ‘Track Town.’

“That's kind of been the focus of much of our campaign over the last 2½ years: to not only be Track Town from June 27 through July 6, or at the Prefontaine Classic. But to be Track Town—and forever.”

we got after first.

It's funny because most people think, "You got there and three weeks later you got the Olympic Trials." The Trials bid was part of it; building a staff was part of it; upgrading Hayward Field was part of it. But no one item of those three was the objective.

The objective—the long-term, visionary piece—is to really improve the popularity of, the excitement of, the support of the sport of track & field. If Hayward Field and Eugene are healthy, we have a better chance of being able to do that nationally and internationally. That's the goal.

I [also] always think about everything long-term. I'm not somebody who looks just at a one-shot deal. I look at everything as "What's next out there?"

T&FN: How has your work as a coach affected your ability to be able to organize and motivate people to take on a chore as large and demanding as hosting the Trials?

Lananna: In each of my positions throughout my career, I've tried to focus my attention on creating a bold, yet attainable, vision for success. Once enough other people could see that vision, too, the projects took on a life and momentum of their own.

Everyone working on Eugene 08 truly understands what a spectacular Trials can mean, not only for our most important constituency—the athletes—but for every spectator, corporate partner, media outlet and so on, that experiences the event. This community is already highly motivated to create something unprecedented and hopefully I'm part of the leadership guid-



DON GOSNEY

Since Lananna arrived on the Oregon scene, venerable Hayward Field has seen a major facelift

ing them in the right direction.

T&FN: Eugene now has major meets every year through 2012: '09 & '11 USATF nationals, '10 NCAA and '12 Trials again. Are you concerned there may be a level of burnout in fans and workers even in a town as track-crazy as Eugene?

Lananna: Not at all. By hosting the '08 Trials, I believe our community has built a solid infrastructure and operating plan for hosting any major meet. We can scale up or scale down as needed. As a result, in subsequent years we'll be able to turn our attention to bold new ideas and focus even more on creating lasting legacy projects with these meets. I think we've only scratched the surface of what we can accomplish.

There could never be a time where the stars have aligned so well for the time to have big meets and lots of them. The burn-out concern I don't really worry about at all, because we have a general population in the state that loves track & field. Not only do I not see it as a burnout, but I see it as a new generation of fans. I think our crowds will get bigger and bigger and the sport will grow greater and greater.

It will be important, however, that we never become complacent. There's always a fear that there's a certain level of entitlement; that you don't have to do anything—you're Track Town and it all will come because of that.

That will be the challenge for this community over the next 8–10 years: to be certain that we don't become complacent.

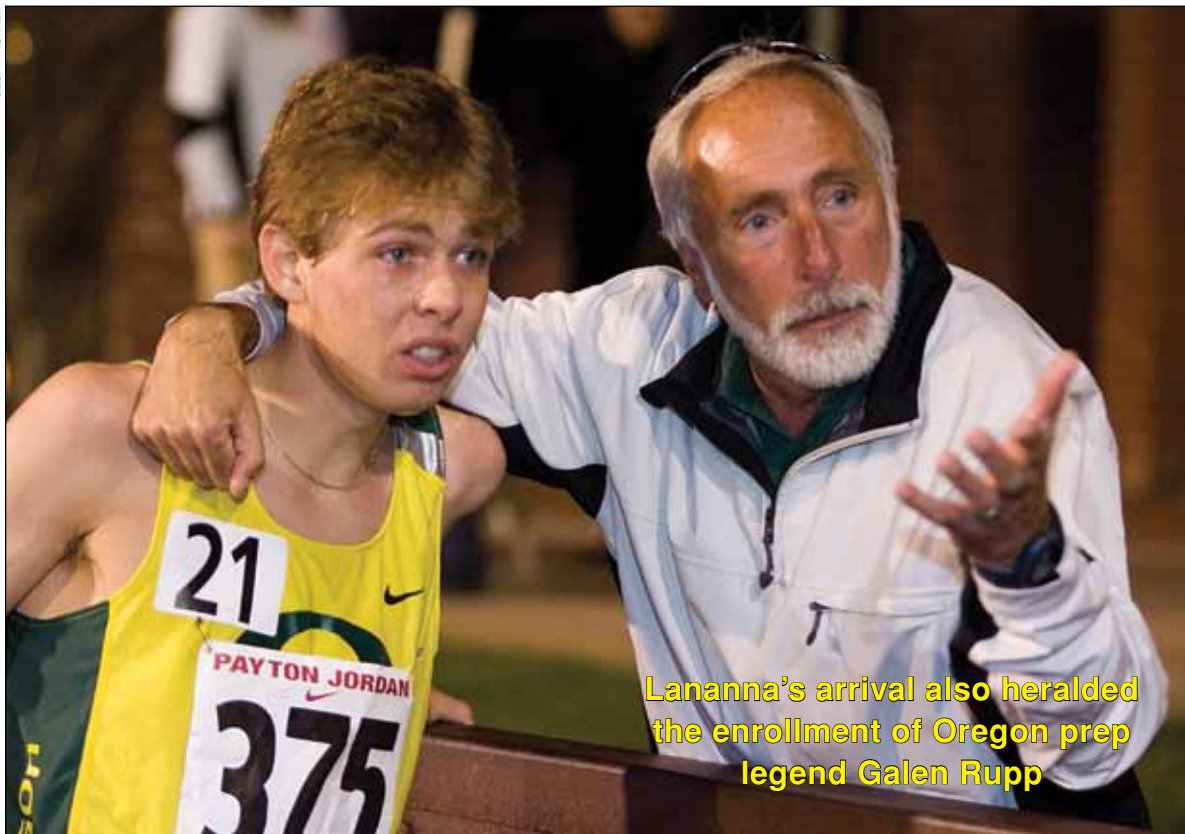
T&FN: So are you trying to make Eugene in '08 an example of how to present the sport throughout the country?

Lananna: My hope is that this will not be confined to Eugene. This is not about having Eugene, Oregon, monopolize events.

This is about creating a template for every time we have a big track event. I don't care where or what it is; indoors, outdoors or cross country.

T&FN: And Eugene's template for staging great meets hopefully can be used anywhere?

Lananna: When you go to the Final Four, or the World Cup, Wimbledon or a major bowl



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Lananna's arrival also heralded the enrollment of Oregon prep legend Galen Rupp

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Lananna Interview

game, it's an *experience*. That's what we're trying to do here with the festival we're going to have during the Trials. We won't get everything accomplished here in 2008. There's just too much to do.

But I do believe that when our business partners see the experience they're going to get at Hayward Field—and what it could be going forward—I think the whole sport of track & field is going to improve.

That's really part of what our core group of leaders—Greg Erwin, Dave Taylor—our fantastic meet director in Michael Reilly—Tom Jordan and Barbara Kousky of Northwest Event Management believes. We have some pretty impressive track minds who have been engaged in what we're doing.

These are people who have tried many different things to get the sport rolling and I do

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think that the experience people are going to have here at these Trials will be a great one. But the one they will get in 2012 will be unprecedented and unparalleled. Hopefully we will have moved the mark so far in '08 that we will knock it out of the park in '12.

T&FN: And success in '08 will benefit the overall Eugene community.

Lananna: I hope that that this community will serve as a place where economically it's a good thing to support track & field. It has to be. We can't continue to struggle with business partnerships; we have to nurture them. We have to clean up the negative publicity of doping. There are so many things that really need to be done—and *can* be done—if sponsors and partners can look at the sport as a viable business investment.

We have to put all the financial pieces of the puzzle together. That's where I give so much credit to the university administration—and president Dave Frohnmayer in particular—who have embraced this and taken the risk by saying, “This is an important part of our community. It's good for Eugene, it's good for the university, it's good for the sport.”

But at the same time, they realize, “We're not majoring in track & field here. We're in the business of education.” That's why there has to be a connection.

“We feel that the economic impact of these Olympic Trials to the economy—plus the next five years—is so big that we feel it is really going to make a huge difference; for the cities of Eugene and Springfield, Lane County, the state, hopefully the region.

Our hope is that it can grow into something that is bigger nationally. □