

From the Training Log of . . .

Geoff Smith

From the time Geoff Smith took the lead 18 miles into the New York City Marathon to the time he collapsed across the finish line nine seconds after Rod Dixon, the question echoing along the marathon route was: "Who is that guy?"

The answer: Geoff Smith is a former British firefighter, a student at Providence College in Rhode Island and one of the world's great untapped marathon talents. He also may be one of the track world's great comedic talents. Here are some excerpts from "The Best of Geoff Smith."

On failing to be admitted to Clemson University in 1979: "I had to take the SAT, but I had been out of school for 10 years. The most I had read was a comic strip. They only gave me 30 minutes to finish the whole test. I was still on the directions at the end."

On life as a firefighter: "It was a good job and I enjoyed it: driving the trucks, racing in and out of fires, being a hero, rescuing damsels in distress and all. . . ."

On his best mile race: "I ran 3:55.8 in the Ainsley-Carr Mile in the summer of 1981, but no one noticed it. I have this recognition problem. It seems to follow me around."

But for all the laughing he does at himself, there's one part of his life Geoff Smith is deadly serious about: his running. "I really like



The Mercey Firefighters' loss was British track's gain. By the end of his first year of serious running, Smith had posted PR's of 29:20 (10,000 meters) and 14:13 (5000 meters). "A coach told me I could make the British Olympic team," he says. "I thought he was crazy."

His progress remained steady, if unnoticed. In 1977 he ran 28:55, in '78 he ran 28:30 and in '79 he ran 28:03. In 1980 he was the third man on the British 10,000-meter team in the Moscow Olympics, narrowly missing the final by finishing seventh in his heat.

"I've been a national-class runner in England since 1977, but I've never gotten any recognition," Smith says. As if to underscore the lack of respect he's received at home, Smith had to earn his spot on the 1980 Olympic squad.

Before New York, Smith's debut marathon, he likened his training program to that of a miler. "I did a lot of real hard speedwork last year," he says. "I'm very much a loner in my training. Occasionally I'll run with a group, but most of the time I run alone." His training philosophy figures to change a bit in the wake of his New York City performance, however. The longest training run he had before the race covered only 24 miles, and it was in the last two miles—actually the last two-tenths of a mile—that the race was decided.

Smith's Schedule

10-Day Training Cycle for New York City

Sunday:

22 miles over hilly course; pretty hard in 2:02

Monday:

A.M.—5 miles, easy
P.M.—10 miles, easy

(On my easy days I concentrate on running relaxed, being sure not to overwork my body. I even go to bed early. My average pace on these days is about 6:00–6:15)

Tuesday:

A.M.—5 miles easy
P.M.—10 miles easy

Wednesday:

A.M.—5 miles easy
P.M.—A hard afternoon session including a three-mile warmup, 6 x 200 meters flat out with a 600-yard recovery between each run. Six-mile warmdown.

Thursday:

A.M.—5 miles easy
P.M.—10 miles easy

Friday:

A.M.—5 miles easy
P.M.—15 miles in 1:17 (5:06 pace)

Saturday:

A.M.—5 miles easy
P.M.—10 miles easy
Total: approximately 120 miles

Sunday:

A.M.—5 miles easy
P.M.—10 miles easy

Monday:

A.M.—5 miles easy

P.M.—10 miles in 53 minutes (5:18 pace) with five hard fartlek efforts on hills varying from 400 to 600 yards in length.

Tuesday:

A.M.—5 miles easy
P.M.—10 miles easy
(Each cycle starts over after 10 days. Smith repeated this cycle four times before New York and raced frequently on the weekends without tapering.)

the idea of seeing how much the body can stand," he says. "My friends back home say that I just like the pain."

"Back home" for Smith is Liverpool, a working-class city containing the population of San Francisco and the ambience of Allentown. The seaport town in best known as the birthplace of the Beatles, but when Geoff Smith was growing up there it was a soccer town. In 1974 the local team won Briton's FA Cup, the equivalent of America's Super Bowl. Given that background, it's not hard to understand why Smith spent most of his childhood running up and down a soccer pitch instead of around a track.

"I played five to six hours a day," he remembers. "As a kid, I wasn't very good in school [studies]."

At 16, Smith joined the Mercey Firefighters, who introduced him to running. "The fire brigade also had a cross-country team. I raced with them sometimes, but I never trained," he says. "I'd finish maybe 10th or 12th in races, getting beat by 40- and 50-year-olds.

"In 1976 they sent a team to Paris. That sounded good, but you had to finish in the top five. I trained for maybe a month. In the race I followed a guy who had been second in the British national championships three years earlier. When I saw the finish ahead of me, I started sprinting like crazy and beat him. It was fun getting on stage and hearing people clap."

"The whole way I was thinking about the last two miles," Smith says. "I knew I could do 24, but I didn't know about the last two. Next time I'll train longer and harder."

Smith's New York City buildup began in late August and included a 20-mile run every 10 days. In between the 20-milers, his long runs consisted of 15 miles at a five-minute pace. Remarkably, Smith's marathon debut could have been even more startling had it come in the 1982 Boston Marathon, as the Providence senior had planned. In January of that year, over a hot and hilly course, Smith had won the Bermuda 10-K in 28:14, chopping a minute off Craig Virgin's course record.

"I did a 20-miler the other day over a hilly course in 1:44, with 20-mile days both days before," Smith said just prior to the '82 Boston race. "I have to start running well at Boston so I can start making more money." Alas, a virus knocked him out of the race and forced him to wait 18 months before tackling his first 26-miler.

And at New York City, Smith wasn't just wading out to try the water—he was diving in feet first. Thanks to a punishing early pace, Smith was heading for a 2:06 with less than six miles to go.

"If you don't go out to do it, you'll never get a 2:06 or 2:07," he explains. "I feel I can run that fast. During the marathon I felt very confident. I thought I was running very sensibly. I didn't feel I was overextending." ✱