

WILLIE SMITH

by Jon Hendershott

Willie Smith once used a unique phrase to describe his approach to the 400: "I'm going to work my chops off to become the best."

That was midway in 1977, following probably his most bitter moment in an otherwise bright, stellar career: making the '76 Olympic team as a sprint relay alternate and then being passed over for the chance to run in Montreal.

Smith had had notable successes up to that time, including a prep record-matching 20.6y in '74 as a senior at Uniondale, N.Y., High and selection as T&FN's High School Athlete of the Year.

But the soft-spoken Smith used that Olympic disappointment to his advantage, becoming in just two seasons one of the leading 400 men in the world. He ranked 3rd globally in '78, but easily was the best American in Europe.

And in only his second one-lapper of 1979, Smith capitalized on an important moment to beat Alberto Juantorena at the Pepsi meet on national television with a world-leading 45.55.

Currently finishing up his degree in mass communications at Auburn, the 23-year-old Smith (2/28/56) is happy that victory came when it did.

T&FN: Nobody beat Juantorena in the 400 last year, so what was your reaction to beating him?

Smith: For sure it added a lot to my confidence. I was glad to have the chance to run against him, in the United States, on television, and it being a pre-Olympic year, it just boosted me.

Now, I don't pretend to know how prepared Juantorena was, but I did beat him. I know he'll be in much better condition for the Pan-Ams—well, he ran 45.77 in Jamaica a week after Pepsi.

T&FN: You almost didn't get to run in the first place, until Billy Mullins was forced to scratch because of injury.

Smith: Well, I don't know exactly what happened; I just wasn't originally invited to the meet. When I found out Juantorena was going to run, I decided it wouldn't be such a bad idea to run against him, for some experience and exposure.

But all the lanes were full and the sponsors weren't absolutely certain that Juantorena would run. Then when a lane came open, I was told the budget was tight and I would have to pay my own way. It was kind of depressing, but I felt it was 48—July 1979

worth it because I wanted the experience.

T&FN: How did the race feel?

Smith: I felt pretty confident; I was a little nervous but I wasn't going to think about it. I just ran my own race. It was our second race; he beat me last summer in Nice [45.29-45.45]. But I knew he was beatable, that I could give him some trouble.



Dave Dreman

T&FN: What does anyone have to do to beat him?

Smith: Just run your own race and forget about what he's doing.

T&FN: Are you, at 5-8½, at somewhat of a disadvantage compared to him at 6-2?

Smith: Yeah, I'm definitely giving up stride length, because he has the longer legs and can stretch out more. But I feel I compensate with my sprinter's speed. He hasn't run 20.6. I feel that's the key: I can accelerate quickly, I can change gears. Plus, I'm fairly strong, so I can hang on for a quarter.

Sure, it would be better if I was taller. I might be running super-class times if I was taller—but I'm not, so I feel I compensate with my speed.

T&FN: Would it be a fair assessment

to say you take an intense approach to your racing?

Smith: I do, because you never know what your competition is going to do. If you're serious during race time, then you should get better results.

It's the idea that when you are as prepared as you can be, you should be able to meet any challenge. If you are well-prepared, you shouldn't have to worry about anyone else. It's just a matter if they are as prepared as you are.

T&FN: With Mullins now out, you're the leading American and fastest in the world with your Pepsi time. Is it important for you to be the No. 1 American, or is it just a matter of satisfying yourself?

Smith: No, it's not just for myself. I thought that last year I would be ranked as the No. 1 American quarter-miler. It makes me feel good, but it does create a little added pressure. People expect, "You're our No. 1; you're our bread and butter." That's about the only pressure I get and I can usually turn it off. If it gets too intense, it can take away some of your sharpness.

But I just try to deal with it. If I am No. 1, I'm happy. I hope I can live up to that ranking, both this year and next year.

T&FN: At this point last season as a senior at Auburn, you were also leading the world, but at 44.73 and you had run under 45.5 three times. Now that you're out of college competition, has the less-demanding schedule proved beneficial?

Smith: It has, but I haven't run as fast because I haven't had the competitions to keep me sharp. I train with the team so I stay in shape, but I try to run some faster workouts to compensate for not running the 400 relay, which kept my speed sharp.

On the other hand, I'll be able to peak for a European-style season; maybe in August rather than in June like in college.

T&FN: You're finishing up school and still training with the team, so it sounds like the transition from college to open competition hasn't been too shocking.

Smith: It's been very smooth. The biggest change is that I'm not competing every single weekend in three events. So I have to keep sharp on my own, because I

can't rely on college competition anymore.

T&FN: How would you say you were affected by making the '76 Olympic team and then being overlooked at Montreal and not competing?

Smith: I think it's made me a stronger, more determined person. I knew I could get right to the doorway, but I couldn't get inside the exclusive club. All it did was make me more determined to get through the door. I was envious of the people who were inside and I wanted it too. So I worked harder. It didn't become the total passion of my life, but when I did work on my sport, the work was total.

Plus I had a friend and teammate in Harvey Gance who did make it inside and I wanted it because we had run together all year. So I was envious, but I turned that into determination, channeled my feelings positively.

T&FN: Considering your successes in the sprints as a prep, was there a time when Willie Smith "became" a 400 man?

Smith: It was gradually incorporated into my training and competitive schedules. Coach Rosen gradually got me used to the idea of running quarters. The change was very smooth and gradual and when Harvey came in, it was obvious that I had to establish myself in another event. I just worked hard then to become a 400 man.

I think Coach Rosen always knew I would be a 400 man, but he never told me.

I always told him how I hated to run the quarter, but it just came to me one day that I would do it. I just made up my mind and I started showing him in my workouts and my competitions that I would try to be the best.

T&FN: Was the mental gearing-up to run the 400 tougher than the physical?

Smith: In the beginning, the mental part was my biggest hang-up. It went hand-in-hand with the physical; mentally I didn't feel I was physically capable of running the quarter. I just had to keep running it and build up my confidence, run against the good guys. Gradually, things just started to click.

T&FN: Now that you have successfully moved into the new sphere of the 400 after your sprint success, what do you think of your ability?

Smith: Well, I'm an honestly modest person and I don't talk much about what I do. I would rather perform on the track. I feel that I was able to make that transition just because I am a determined person. I just had inner determination and I wasn't going to let anything slow me down. There were things I wanted out of life, success in running being one of them.

T&FN: You have your speed, but what else makes you one of the best 400 men in the world?

Smith: Having confidence in my ability to race, confidence in my race. That

can make all the difference. Like at Pepsi, I just concentrated on running a good hard quarter. I tried to tune everybody else out and do what I wanted to do.

T&FN: Doing well is the name of the game, but why else is that important to you?

Smith: It distinguishes me from other men. It's important to me because I was given this talent—it's a God-given talent—and I would be stupid not to capitalize on it. So I'm using my ability to get what I want out of life, to put me in a better position, to distinguish me from other people. I've been to school and to many places in the world that otherwise I would never see, just because of my ability to run.

I really don't know what I might have done if I had never run. I had a lot of other interests when I was younger—things like oceanography and archaeology—but I realized there wasn't a market for that. I've always been interested in athletics and I could see as I grew that track was taking me away from those things. So I made a decision to go into a field that might go hand-in-hand with track.

I'm not 100% certain, but I'll probably stay here to train for next year. I'm comfortable here at Auburn and I don't want anything to distract me, to deter me from what I want, which is the Olympics. □



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