



BORN TO UNRUI

At 63, competitive runner Jay Smith shows no signs of slowing down

Written and Photographed by Robbie Harms



Jay Smith glides smoothly around UNC's **Irwin Belk Track** on a cloudy September morning, sporting a blue Puma singlet and black Mizuno running shorts accentuated with blue stripes down either side. Dark, round sunglasses cover his intense eyes and multicolored Saucony track spikes and white ankle socks adorn the bottom of his skinny white legs.

By all accounts, he appears like a typical runner. His arms swing wide, but he looks relaxed. The others on the track pay no mind to Smith. They have seen him do this a thousand times before.

What they may not know is that Smith is a competitive runner who races in Masters track meets and other events across the country, a firecracker of a man who speaks softly and defies old-man stereotypes and treats his body like most Division-I athletes treat theirs. Simply put, he's a 63-year-old man who does what most 63-year-old men do not.

TRAINING DAY

His workout this morning is four 400-meter repeats, followed by a brief rest of a 200-meter walk and a 100-meter jog. He has a training partner, a clunky, 71-year-old man named **Maurice McDonald**, and they stagger – start in different lanes – before taking off for the third repeat.

As they turn the corner into the last 100 meters, they find a wall of students blocking their path.

“OK,” Smith says between breaths. “We’ve got some traffic.”

“Yeah,” McDonald says, huffing. “Go wide.”

They alter their path around the students and finish in a sprint.

“Beautiful, Maurice,” Smith says to McDonald, whose hands are on his knees, his lungs searching for air. “Beautiful.” ➤

SIX-MINUTE MILE

The times for the repeats were 84, 83, 78 and 79 seconds, respectively, and Smith, content, walks off the track and begins a structured stretching routine.

“The workout was good,” he says. “It did what it needed to do.”

Smith, who lives in the Stoneridge neighborhood of Chapel Hill, is detail-oriented and precise, especially when it comes to his revered track workouts, which he runs two to three times a week on UNC’s track.

“Jay maintains a great blend of intensity, rationality and support,” says **Kristin Sellers**, a 23-year-old UNC graduate student and ex-Division-I runner with whom Smith occasionally trains. “I don’t think we’ve ever done a workout in which Jay hasn’t come away being happy with at least the effort, if not the effort and results.”

Smith met Sellers in January when they were both running a workout around UNC’s indoor track one winter night.

“There are not many people working out indoors after 7 p.m. during a weekday,” Smith says. “I said, ‘Anybody who’s a fool enough to be in here on a January night when it’s cold, running repeats – I got to figure out who this is.’”

A typical week for Smith consists of two to three track workouts, a yoga session, weight training, three recovery days – either complete rest or a four- to five-mile jog – and a race.

That week’s race was Sunday’s **Magnificent Mile** in Raleigh, which he finished in six minutes flat, a time that landed him atop the men’s 60 to 64 age group.

“I would’ve been embarrassed if I didn’t [win the age group],” he says. “Seriously – a fella’s got his pride, you know.”

The second-place finisher in Smith’s age group was more than two minutes behind him.

LATE BLOOMER

“You’ve reached the voicemail of Jay Smith,” his voice, soft and high-pitched, says through the phone. “Tell me what I need to know, and I’ll get back to you. See ya.”

So begins the process of learning about the man some consider legendary, others refreshing, others crazy.

Spend 30 minutes with Smith, and it’s clear he’s a combination of all three. His sense of humor is sharp and self-deprecating – “[McDonald]’s old enough to be your grandpa. Hell, I might be,” he says – and he realizes not many people his age are regularly pumping out 78-second 400-meter repeats.

He’s a rare breed in more ways than one, though. Smith, who attended UNC and later served as its associate vice president

for finance, didn’t begin running until his late 20s and didn’t enter his first competitive race until he was 50.

“I’m what’s called a late bloomer,” he says. “In some ways I’ve aged kind of gracefully.”

He started solely to stay in shape for tennis but soon found he was better suited for running.

When he was 55, he hired his first coach and began training with elite, “borderline world-class” runners at UNC.

In 2007, Smith hired **Anthony Fleg**, a UNC medical school student who served as the club cross country coach, to coach him. Fleg now lives in Albuquerque, but still provides Smith with workouts and training tips via email and phone.

“As we get close to a race, we tend to talk,” Smith says. “He understands the psychology of racing. I could basically handle workouts on my own, but he knows the mental side.”

“A lot of conversations right before meets are sort of a motivator,” Fleg says. “Reminding him that he’s in good shape and he’s put in a lot of hard work.”

Smith’s breakthrough moment came in August, when he medaled for the first time, a third-place finish in the 800 meters at the U.S. Track and Field Outdoor Masters Championships. His time was 2:31.

‘HE HAS THIS AURA’

Running past the age 60 requires a unique mix of longevity and discipline, and Smith has mastered it.

He’s a living embodiment of permanence, an inspiration for runners that they can still run when they’re past their prime.

“He personifies that running, and even racing, can be life-long,” Sellers says.

“That man,” says UNC sophomore **Connor Belson**, who runs on the club cross country team, “is exactly what I want to be like when I’m older. He has this aura. ... I can’t put it into words.”

Smith’s bond to running is a triumvirate of attraction: competition, camaraderie and health.

“I really enjoy working out and staying in shape. I feel better, sleep better. I eat more healthy,” he says. “It’s just a good lifestyle, and I think it’s an even better lifestyle when you’re older ... And the other thing is having a community of really good runners – you associate with people who have a value system similar [to yours]. I don’t want to wax philosophically too much, but there’s something to it.”

And he has no plans to stop.

One of Smith’s favorite spots to train is **Duke Forest**. He particularly likes a route called Hard Climb Hill.

“I used to tell my wife,” Smith says, “‘If I die at my desk, cry for me. If I die going up Hard Climb Hill, celebrate.’” **CHM**