

Geoff Smith

He was born on October 24th, 1953, and brought up in the Deysbrook area of West Derby, going to Bankfield, and later West Derby Comprehensive School on Queens Drive. Like most lads, he played football, and he remains an Evertonian to this day. He modestly says that he was not very good at the game, and his one "claim to fame" was in a match at infant school, where he marked future Everton player Ronnie Goodlass out of the game. When he left school, he joined the Fire Service, still playing football and, through their sports club, started running to keep fit with a couple of work mates. Then, at around twenty years of age, he heard about an international Fire Brigades cross-country meeting in Paris, with expenses paid and a week off on full pay. He trained hard for five weeks, won the trial race and finished third in Paris! That was the beginning of a sporting career which would see him competing all over the world, including appearances at two Olympic Games.

In the mid-1970s, with one of his mates, he joined Southport Harriers, and showed considerable promise. He realised he needed to train and race with a stronger club, and joined Liverpool Harriers, even though a switch between two nearby clubs meant having to serve a nine month ban from all team competitions. The squad he joined already had a high quality middle distance group, including Frank Davies, John Woods, Pete Waddington, and Dave Murphy (who, like Geoff, would later go across the Atlantic), but he immediately impressed them with his ability and, more notably, his incredible ambition and confidence. He was soon under the wing of coach John Butler, who was to guide him through three successful years. Geoff acknowledges the debt he owes to John, but still remembers how much he hated the 800 metres repetition sessions!

In 1979, Geoff clocked the fastest 10,000 metres in the world of 28mins 03secs, but then he developed the dreaded "shin splints". After visiting a specialist in London, he was referred to a surgeon in Manchester, who was treating hurdler Bill Hartley. This led to Geoff meeting Eddie Soens, the "Bill Shankly" of the cycling world, who began to get him back to full fitness. Eddie was to work Geoff very hard, building him up to be stronger than ever. Sadly for Geoff, once again the hated 800 metres repetitions were a vital part of the schedule, just as under John Butler's tutelage.

Geoff made his international debut in the semi final of the European Cup, and was chosen for the 1980 Olympic Games in Moscow, in the 10,000 metres. He ran in the "heat of hell": not just the weather, but the quality of the field in his qualification round, and he failed to make the final. His heat included Lasse Viren (who had won the gold in 1972 and 1976), Ireland's John Treacy, and eventual gold medal winner Miruts Yifter (known as "Yifter the Shifter") to name just a few. In either of the two other heats, Geoff would probably have made the final.

After ten years as a fireman, he took up an offer of a Scholarship at Providence College, USA, which was to change his life. This was a lad who had hated school but, while he found studying hard in the early terms, he finished with a degree in Business Studies. By now, he had signed agreements with Nike and another sports equipment company, which helped him financially. One race which stands out in his memories of that time was when Rod Dixon of New Zealand (Olympic Bronze medallist) beat him in the New Year's Eve race, which started at midnight. The weather was so cold (22F below) that he ran in a tracksuit! Some experience!

By 1981, Geoff was demonstrating ability across a wide range of events. He topped Liverpool Harriers rankings at 1500metres (3mins 42.6secs), one mile (3mins 55.8secs), 5,000metres (13mins 26.33secs) and 10,000 metres (27mins 43.76secs). He had a particularly good run in the prestigious "Emsley Carr Mile", where he was regarded as an outsider but led every step of the way for a famous victory.

Geoff's excellent performances continued in 1982, including beating an international field in a 10km road race in Bermuda, but his thoughts were moving towards the marathon. The first ever running of the New York Marathon, in 1970, was a low-key event. By 1983, it had become a major event on the world-wide calendar, and Geoff ran brilliantly in his first attempt at the distance. He shot off at amazing pace and pulled out a big lead, but then "died" towards the end, probably due to dehydration. He was caught within sight of the finish, by New Zealand's Rod Dixon, who had also moved up distance, after taking Bronze in the 1500m in the 1972 Olympics. The photo shows Rod celebrating while Geoff struggles with cramped legs. Geoff ran a UK best of 2hrs 9mins 8secs in that race, behind Rod's 2hrs 8mins 59secs. This time improved Ian Thompson's record of 2:09:12 from 1974, but only lasted a year, being supplanted by Steve Jones' 2:08:05 in October 1984.



This marathon debut was to set Geoff up for the legendary Boston Marathon, first held on "Patriots Day" in 1897. On April 16th 1984, Geoff won it in 2hrs 10mins 34secs, which earned him a place

in the 1984 Olympic Marathon in Los Angeles in August. Tragically, the effects of an infected tooth and consequent antibiotics, left him on the roadside, after being with the leading group at 11 miles, which included the great Rob de Castella, and the first three home: Carlos Lopes, John Treacy, and England's Charlie Spedding. After this disappointment, Geoff soon got back into good form, and finished a creditable fifth in the Chicago Marathon in October, won by Steve Jones, who sportingly picked Geoff up when he fell during the race.

The lad from West Derby was to become a legend in the "Boston", winning the event again in 1985 and finishing third in 1987, and eventually he settled in the area. On August the 18th 1985, he married his girlfriend, Linda, a tennis coach, and he took out American citizenship in 1988, on the birth of their first child. This made him eligible for the USA Olympic team, but he missed the trials through illness. His last major victory was a marathon in China, before retiring in 1990. He still attends each Boston Marathon, but now as a celebrity, being interviewed and giving advice to competitors.



Geoff earned his living firstly as a financial adviser, before going back to college and getting a teaching degree. For over a decade he has been teaching youngsters with learning and behaviour problems. The family is now two daughters and a son, who are all into football. Geoff's own sporting activities are limited since he had a hip replacement, but he recognises that his running was the key to what has been a different and very successful way of life.

December 2009

Postscript

Since Arthur drafted the above article, an interview conducted in America in 2004 has come to light on the internet, which gives an insight into Geoff's philosophy, in particular his amazing self-confidence:

20 Years Later: An Interview with Two-Time Boston Marathon Winner Geoff Smith

This year marks the twentieth anniversary of the first of Geoff Smith's two victories in the Boston Marathon. As a senior at Providence College, Geoff won the 1984 Boston Marathon in 2:10:34, more than four minutes ahead of his nearest competitor. The following year he went on to win again, completing the first half of the race in a record time of 1:02:51. Leg cramps at mile 19 slowed his pace, but he again won decisively, in 2:14:05; this time in very warm temperatures, in contrast to the cold and rain of the previous year. Since Bill Rodgers in the late 1970s, Geoff is one of only three Boston Marathon champions to win the race in consecutive years. Geoff is an accomplished Olympian, having competed for Great Britain in the 10,000 metres in 1980 and the marathon in 1984. Geoff now lives in Mattapoisett, Massachusetts and coaches at an area high school. Recently, Charlotte Cuneo interviewed Geoff to talk about his Boston victories and what he is currently doing.

CR: Did you feel going into the '84 Boston you had a chance to win?

GS: Yes, I knew I was going to win. I had trained hard and was well prepared.

CR: Did you expect to have more competition?

GS: No - it was an Olympic year, so most of the competitors were going to the Olympic trials for their respective countries. I needed a good time to make the British Olympic team and felt I could do that in Boston.

CR: 1984 was a cold, raw day, with a headwind. Was it difficult to run alone in the lead in such tough conditions?

GS: The wind was blowing into my face, and it had snowed two days before the marathon. I just enjoyed running it. Most of my training sessions were by myself, so I was used to running alone.

CR: Did you achieve notoriety from being a Boston Marathon champion? More than you had before that?

GS: Yes - I received more recognition from winning Boston.

CR: Did you ever dream of/hope to win the Boston Marathon when you first began to run?

GS: No. I just wanted to be the best in my club, then the best in my county, then the best in the country, and finally the best in the world. I achieved the first three. I was ranked in the top half-dozen runners in the world, but didn't make it to the best in the world. However, I was ranked number 2 in the world at 10,000 metres in 1982 by Track and Field News.

CR: What motivated you to run the Boston Marathon?

GS: As I mentioned earlier, I needed a good marathon time to qualify for the British Olympic team. The decision was between the Boston and London marathons. I was a senior at Providence College and did not want to take a month off from school to run London, so I chose the Boston Marathon.

CR: Did you expect to win again in 1985?

GS: Yes, I wanted to break the world record. I knew that you could really run fast on the Boston course, and I wanted to prove it with a world record.

CR: You were headed for a course record that year. What do you think contributed to the difficulties that slowed your pace?

GS: At Heartbreak Hill, I developed leg cramps. The weather was hot, and I wasn't drinking enough. Looking back, I was prone to dehydration. It had happened to me in the New York Marathon at mile 22 to 23 the previous year (when I finished second in a duel with Rod Dixon).

CR: What was your training program like for the Boston Marathon?

GS: My weekly mileage was about 115 miles. I ran on a 10-day cycle: every tenth day I would do a long run of 20 plus miles; I would pyramid up and then down. Then on alternating fifth days I would run 5 miles in the morning and 15 mile tempo runs at five-minute-per-mile pace in the afternoon. Other days, I would run twice a day: 5 miles in the morning and 10 miles in the afternoon. I would also do track sessions.

CR: Was it easy or difficult to make the transition from the track to the marathon?

GS: I continued to train on the track two days per week when training for the marathon.

CR: You were one of the last to win Boston before the big prize money came in. How did you feel about that?

GS: It was disappointing, but I can't cry about it. I just enjoyed running. Winning and running fast was the name of the game

CR: What is your view on the current Boston Marathon, specifically the Kenyan domination and the bigger overall fields?

GS: The quality of running has declined in the U.K. and the U.S. The Kenyan field is the product of dollars that the sponsors have put on the table.

CR: Do you have any advice for runners training for the Boston Marathon?

GS: Be prepared. Do hills in training and don't get caught up in the first half, which is downhill.

CR: How did you get involved in running?

GS: I always ran and I played soccer. I worked for the fire department in England and joined the track team. I gradually gave up soccer and changed to running, and then began to take time off to compete outside the fire department.

CR: Did you expect to become a long distance runner?

GS: Yeah, but if I could turn back the clock, I would do it differently. I started running when I was 21 years old. The 5,000 and 10,000 meters were my events. I hated speed. When I was 25 I saw the need for speed and set out to improve my 400, 800 and my mile times. There is a need for speed at the end of a race. I became a miler at the end of my career. In 1976, I was a 10,000-meter runner with average times in the 29 minute range. In 1982, to improve my 10,000-meter time, I worked on speed. I ran a 3:55 minute mile. Through 1986, I believed I could break 4 minutes for the mile.

CR: What are your running-related activities now?

GS: I coach high school indoor track and spring track at a regional high school in Massachusetts. In the summer, I run a kids' running program in my community. We have had as many as 250 kids attend. There are up to 30 counsellors. The program is held from 6:00 to 8:00 p.m. on Monday and Wednesday evenings and includes all disciplines of track & field.

In the summer I am also a director and coach at the Newport Running Camp (www.newportrunningcamps.com) in Newport, Rhode Island. It is great for both adults and kids. There is great running available for all age groups, and opportunities for all to learn from counsellors and world class athletes. Many successful high school teams attend with their coaches. For example, Ken Pelletier attends with his boys and girls cross country teams, and he has developed one of the most successful programs in Massachusetts at his Gardner High School. Campers also have the opportunity to talk comfortably with world class runners such as Matt Centrowitz, Rob DeCastella, Marc Davis, and many others.

November 2011