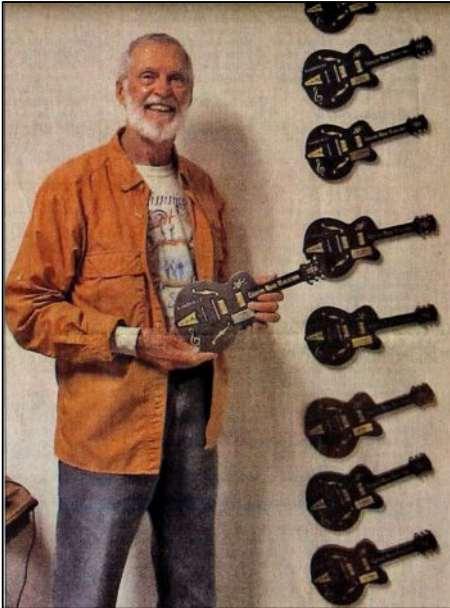


PROFESSOR ENDURANCE RUNNER WRITER
DALLAS SMITH IS ALL OF THE ABOVE

By Charles Denning, Herald-Citizen Staff
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On a Sunday morning in the spring of 2002, a stranger left a compelling message on Dallas Smith's answering machine.



A week before, Dallas had run the Country Music Marathon in Nashville. Though not a reporter, he'd tried writing a story about that race, and on this Sunday morning it had been featured prominently in the *Herald-Citizen*.

(Pictured: Dallas Smith holds one guitar-shaped trophy and on the wall behind him are 10 others that he won for first place finished sin his age group at Nashville's annual Country Music Marathon. Photo by Charles Denning).

His caller had just read Dallas's story, she told him.

He had written what was actually a moving account of the race, filled with all the color and emotion, the people and personal glimpses, the shouts and cries, the sweat and tears and unleashed joy of a major athletic competition.

He listened to the voice on his phone recorder, feeling a little overcome, somewhat awed, then played the message again.

Quite obviously the story had touched her. "I could tell she was chocking back sobs as she left the message," said Dallas.

Her husband, a Tennessee Tech student, had also run the marathon, she explained, and "That was the most wonderful story I've ever read."

"I listened to it several time," Dallas said.

Sure, he enjoyed the heartfelt compliment she bestowed upon him – but there was something more, and it emerged as a surprise to him. Or a revelation.

"I was impressed that the story could evoke emotion in a reader," he said, "that a story I wrote could have that effect on someone."

Perhaps the story here is about how a few sincere and encouraging words from a stranger can wield a fateful impact. For that, in fact, is what happened.

Who was Dallas Smith? He was Dr. Dallas Smith, mainly a university professor, teaching engineering science and math, occasionally a bridge designer, sometimes a consultant for the Army Missile Command and an aerospace scientist for NASA. That's what he'd done for 30 years of his life.

He was born and raised in the northwest half of Jackson County, about 30 miles from Cookeville, where the Cumberland River curves down through the hills, carving spacious "bends" that give communities their names – as in Smiths' Bend. As a boy, he did what many other country boys did in the early 1950's.

"I grew up with a .410 in my hand roaming the hills," he said. When he shot a groundhog, he would take it to his grandmother and she would cook it.

"Hunting was a part of my upbringing but not a big part of what I do now."

After high school in Gainesboro, he went to Tennessee Tech and majored in engineering, a choice that rose from his DNA probably. He says his dad had "a good mechanical aptitude." And a choice inspired by a river bridge that still stands in nearby Carthage – now out-dated, unsafe, condemned, blocked off and abandoned.

Picture a teenaged boy marveling at that span of steel and concrete that reaches like an outstretched arm high across the rolling Cumberland, linking the small town with the highway that clings to the bluff on the opposite side – US Highway 70, that 2,000-mile road to the rest of the world that on the maps of its day was called "The Broadway of America."

"It was an impressive structure," Dallas says.

Perhaps he wondered what it would be like to take a sharp pencil and a T-square and a slide rule (that was before electronic calculators) and sit at a slanted table and draw bridges like that and see them materialize in real life and carry cars and trucks across a river.

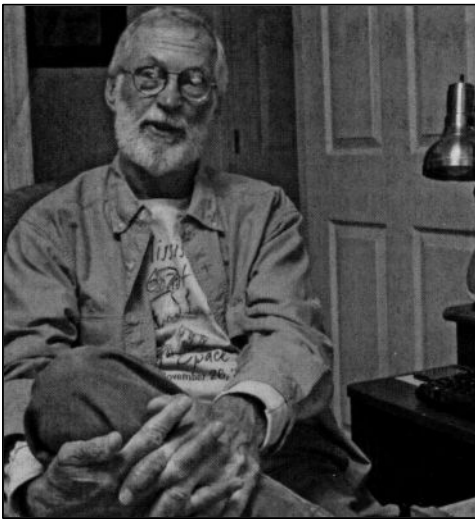
Once out of Tennessee Tech with a civil engineering degree in hand, he found out what it would be like. He got a job in Nashville with the state highway department and designed bridges for two years.

Then, back to TTU for a master's and, by now, he was becoming committed to the life of an academic. At Virginia Tech, he earned a PhD and stayed in Blacksburg for a year teaching engineering as an assistant professor.

In June 1970, he came back home to Tennessee Tech, taught there as a full professor for almost 30 years and retired in May 1999.

During those decades, while studying engineering and while occupied as a teacher in the classroom and in summer jobs with math formulas and engineering problems and “rocket science,” from time to time he surrendered to an urge to put words on paper and write stories. English classes, however, were merely a requirement. “I wasn’t very interested. It was something I had to do,” he said. “I barely passed.”

Oddly- or maybe not so oddly – he wrote articles for “Homespun,” the literary magazine at Tennessee Tech. Later, he published articles in “Field & Stream” magazine and “Outdoor Life and Sports Afield” and “Handguns,” articles on quail hunting and hand-loading ammunition for .357 pistols and archery.



“They pretended to be authoritative, how-to articles,” he says modestly, but the word “pretend” fails to hide the fact that he does know a lot about those subjects and knows it first-hand.

(Pictured: Dallas Smith in his study at his Cookeville home. Photo by Charles Denning).

At some point, he began to read the big-time writers, Hemingway, Steinbeck, Faulkner. He realized, he says wryly, that “College had interrupted my education for a long time.”

He also sat down at a Smith Corona portable and typed out a novel. Made two copies. Kept one in the trunk of his car. Dropped the other in a file cabinet in his office in Clement Hall, the engineering building at Tennessee Tech. As his retirement approached in the spring of 1999 and he started cleaning out his office, he found the copy in a binder.

“I was like Bob Seeger where he sings the ling,’...what to leave in, what to leave out...,” he said, making a reference to music, as he often does, usually his favorite jazz singers. That copy of his novel had been sleeping there since the mid 1960’s. Along with much other stuff, it went into a dumpster.

That may be what happened as well to the copy he’d kept in the trunk of his car, he’s not sure. It disappeared. “Evidently I threw it away,” he says.

About the time he was leaving his vocation as an engineer, Dallas found an unexpected avocation. A year before, in April 1998, he had pulled on a pair of running shoes and entered the Golden Eagle 10-K race at Tennessee Tech. He was 57 years old. He’d been a jogger since he was 40. This was his first race. When he told his wife, Jo Ann, what he was doing, she asked: “Why?”

Much to his astonishment, he won first in his age division for that 6-mile race and was declared the division's "Master Runner."

Perhaps the ensuing 14 years have been a determined effort to answer Jo Ann's "why?"

From Boston to New York City to San Francisco. From Stockholm to Barcelona and Seville. From Anchorage, Alaska, to Jamaica to the Mississippi Coast to Indianapolis and 12 times in Nashville's annual Country Music event, he has competed in scores of marathons - an estimated 250 races, including Ironman triathlons and that ultra-marathon on the plains of Kansas where you run 100 miles, beginning one morning, running all day and all night and ending the next morning. Most of the time, he has led the pack in his age group.

As if running itself weren't enough, as if keeping his body and mind aimed on the finish line weren't enough, Dallas Smith has pursued yet another hobby.

He has chronicled those years as an observer, as a reporter, a writer with a keen eye always peeled on the sidelines, on the before and after, on the human drama. In writing that 2002 article about the Country Music Marathon, the article that drew the inspiring phone call, he revived an interest the thought he'd tossed into the dumpster years before.

He'd never dared think of himself as a writer. At time it had been a dim and distant dream - sure, just one of those 'impossible dreams.'

Now, though, he found himself becoming a writer. For real.

A series of stories followed. In 2004, he collected some of them between the covers of a book, "Falling Forward: Tales from an Endurance Saga."

But they are not "running stories." He doesn't advise runner on how to do it faster or better.

"Yes, running is a thread that weaves through some of the stories I write," he says. "But they're stories about personal encounters, about people I've shared experiences with - and some have nothing to do with running."

His second book, 40 stories from the years 2004 to 2011, came off the press in recent weeks.

At age 71, he titled it "Going Down Slow." A little tongue-in-cheek, perhaps. And a little premature.

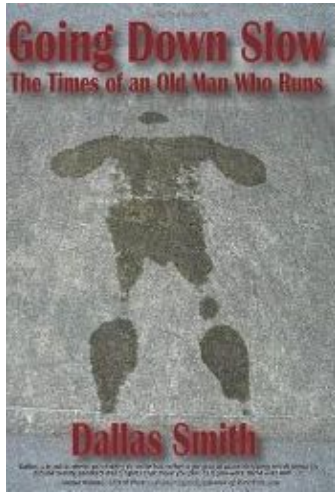
Last year he ran seven marathons. Going down slow?

A map of the Foothills Running location can be found at www.foothillsrunning.com

Book Description

Publication Date: **October 3, 2011**

Going Down Slow, The Times of an Old Man Who Runs. The word "runs" appears in the



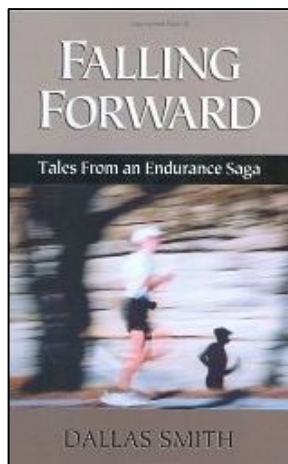
subtitle of this memoir, and the act of running spans the breadth of it. So it is perhaps fair if some call this a running book. Running, however, is not the main topic. Adventure is. Author Dallas Smith is drawn to the adventure his hobby brings. Running is indeed a constant presence in the stories, but mostly as a current that sweeps him along, the reason he encounters the places he describes, the people he meets, and the adventure he finds. Running connects him to everything and everyone. Events and episodes vary widely, as do the locales where they play out, stretching from the urbane glamor of Stockholm, Sweden to Spain's El Camino de Santiago to the tussocks of the Arctic tundra to a flood-scoured gorge in Tennessee-and places in between. A run through Central Park suddenly shifts and takes the reader on a

fishing trip where three adolescent boys of a distant time and place pulled sagging carp out of a muddy swamp and lugged their haul home. Smith finds adventures and brings them home. This sprawling story delights and surprises readers. Smith brings observation, insight, and wit. His narrative flows like the smooth stride of a fast runner and makes the reader feel as if he, too, were there experiencing the color and danger of these episodic adventures.

Book Description

Publication Date: **November 2004**

Falling Forward is a beautifully written story of one man's quest for individual accomplishments in the sport of long distance running (marathons, ultra-marathons, and Iron Man.)



His most spectacular exploit was running three ultra-marathons...on three consecutive weekends he ran 100 miles, 100 miles, and 50 miles in Arkansas, Kansas, and Texas respectively, and on the fourth weekend he won his age division in a big 5K in yet a fourth state. Indeed, in the three years following the resignation of a long held professorship, he ran a dazzling array of races. In the process he set several age-group records and won the Tennessee State Running Tour championship.

And he's over sixty.

Smith draws on this race saga to write a book of genuine adventure, one accessible to runner and non-runner alike. He writes like he runs, with a sharp eye for the details surrounding him -- and he embraces all, taking the reader along for the journey.

His story deals honestly with the stark reality of pushing endurance to the limit. The experiences are at times poignant and funny, at other times painful and scary, but always human and personal. *Falling Forward* covers a lot of territory.

*Read more about the people of Putnam Co., TN at: <http://www.ajalmbert.com>