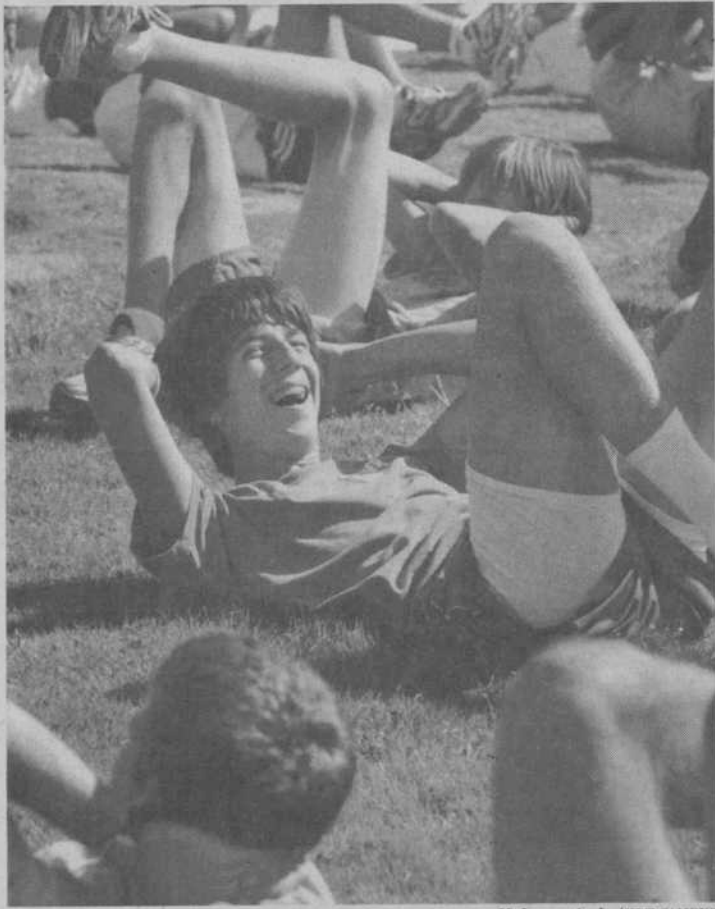


# Full speed ahead for runner with debilitating disorder

Student regains use of legs through physical therapy, hospitalization



H. Lorren Au Jr. / KRT CAMPUS  
Nic Smith, center, who battles the neurological disorder known as transverse myelitis, works out with his Dana Hills cross country teammates Oct. 11 in Dana Point, Calif.

Jeff Miller

THE ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

**LAGUNA NIGUEL, Calif.** — This is a story he'd rather not tell. Not yet, at least. Maybe in a year or so, after he has done something.

Nic Smith, having consented to question after question, finally had a question of his own to ask: How'd you find out about this anyway?

Sorry kid, some stories are too good not to be shared, are too special to remain unwritten. Some stories, it could even be said, have legs of their own, are strong enough to stand alone.

This is one of them — the story of the runner who suddenly had no legs ... then rallied to find them again.

Memorial Day, 2004. A so-ordinary family trip to the beach at San Onofre, Calif. Surfing, volleyball, then a barbecue with friends. Typical way to welcome summer.

For Nic, typical way to pass a weekend, too. At Dana Hills High, he always was running, jumping; resting just long enough to run again. He had stood out as a freshman, similar to his older brother, Scott, who is good enough now to run for UC Santa Barbara.

Nic even competed in track and volleyball, practicing up to four hours a day. He won awards, ran the mile in 4 minutes, 50 seconds and seemed a cinch to continue pressing the pace in cross country.

But at 4 a.m. after that Memorial Day, only a week

after Nic had been honored as a spring sports MVP, he was awakened by his legs, which were aching. The lower half of his body felt limp, weak. He got up and tried to walk away the pain. He stumbled into his parents' room, where his mother, Julie, drowsily diagnosed "growing pains." Nic, knowing he recently had sprouted 3 inches, thought, OK maybe. Mom would get some Advil.

"By the time she got back, I

think I was on the ground crying," Nic, now 16 and a junior, says. "That's when we knew the emergency room was probably a pretty good idea."

Quickly unable to walk on his own, he scooted down the stairs on his rear end. At the hospital, he had to support himself by leaning on trash cans. They finally found him a wheelchair.

The tests began with a spinal tap, moving on to the first of two MRIs. There was another

test in which sensors were placed all over Nic's body. Doctors also poked several small needles into his legs.

They tried science and simplicity, one doctor running a key along the bottom of Nic's bare foot, checking for numbness.

"You're watching this thinking, 'Come on, Nic, move your toes, please,' his father, Greg, says. "Come on, move

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H. Lorren Au Jr. / KRT CAMPUS  
Nic Smith, foreground right, runs with his Dana Hills cross country teammates Oct. 11. During summer 2004, he was unable to walk or even to stand upright. He has since regained the use of his legs, although he says his muscles are always tight.

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