



No looking back

Duke's Nolan Smith is more than just an elite basketball player; he also gives his time to help others, who like him, have lost a parent

By **Dan Wiederer**
Staff writer

Most likely it was just coincidence, a bit of impulse, perhaps part defense mechanism. Whatever it was, when the final shot of the 2009-10 college basketball season was launched – a half-court Gordon Hayward bomb to decide the national championship – Duke guard Nolan Smith refused to look back.

He can't explain why.

But as he darted toward Hayward, then slipped past the Butler star's hip, Smith's instinct told him to not turn around, to learn the result of the biggest game he'd ever played in by gauging the reaction of the Blue Devils fans inside Lucas Oil Stadium.

"I was staring into that sea of blue, waiting to see if all those Duke fans were shocked or whether their hands stayed high in the air," Smith says. "When I saw all those hands stay raised, I knew to rejoice."

Still, there was something telling in Smith's reaction, something reflective of the philosophy by which he lives.

Looking back, he has learned, can be distressing.

Looking ahead is often far more constructive.



McClatchy-Tribune file photos

'I realized I had to come into my own as a reflection of who my father was. That meant being a tough person who loved playing the game. But more importantly, it meant being someone who never ran from struggle. When I learned that's who my dad was and who I could be, I found purpose. I found me.'

Nolan Smith, whose father died 14 years ago

It's been more than 14 years since the worst moment of Nolan Smith's life, his father Derek — then just 34, a former NBA standout and an assistant coach with the Washington Bullets — suffering a fatal heart attack on a cruise ship and leaving Nolan to lead the rest of his life without the best friend he's ever had.

Smith has spent two-thirds of his life coping. But at times the emotional swings still startle him.

So just before midnight on April 5, when Hayward's shot missed, Smith was engulfed first by a Kyle Singler hug, then by a tidal wave of emotion he should have been expecting but wasn't.

He was living a dream, a national champion at last. Yet he immediately wished he was sharing the achievement with his dad.

Without warning, his delighted screams gave way to a waterfall of tears.

"Looking at Nolan, I knew," says Monica Malone, Smith's mother. "I knew those tears. He was so happy. But those tears, especially after winning it all, it was like, 'Dang. My dad's not here to see this.'"

For Smith, it's a recurring emotion the experts have never given a name — elation and grief in an unwinnable war.

"It takes your breath away," he says. "You've done something so great and yet it's hard to fully enjoy."

He shakes his head, then stops trying to talk it through.

"You have to have experienced it to really understand how it feels. It takes time to learn how to deal with it all."

And with that, Smith cracks the window to something deeper — his understanding of this intense numbness and his ability to use it productively.

Smith understands his situation isn't unique. With that in mind, he has gone out of his way to become a reliable friend and mentor for other kids from the Washington, D.C., area who have lost their fathers.

Quinn Cook, a top recruit in the Class of 2011 and part of the same D.C. Assault program that Smith played for, lost his father in 2008. For Cook, Smith has been both a dear friend and a role model.

Eric Atkins, now a freshman at Notre Dame and also a D.C. Assault product, lost his dad to cancer four years ago. Smith gives him a listening ear.

UNC-Charlotte big man Chris Braswell lost the

closest thing he had to a dad in 2005 when Charle Craig, the father figure in his life, was shot to death. Smith has reached out to Braswell, too.

"There's a lot that goes with all that, pressing on without your dad," Smith says. "For me, this is an opportunity to reach out. I have the strength to do that now. A few years back, I don't think I would have been ready. But now that I'm older, now that I'm more mature, I can be strong for these guys who they need extra strength. I need to show them there are ways to move forward."

As optimistic and fun-loving as Smith always seems, the power of his advice comes from his ability to acknowledge his frailty.

Smith understands over the past 14 years he's been shaped by moments of weakness, anger and confusion.

When Cook talks about the sorrow he feels during the most miniscule moments — seeing a Father's Day commercial, watching his teammates visit with their dads after games — Smith knows exactly what he's talking about.

He's been through those moments and figured out ways to absorb the sting.

"We can all talk about what we would try to do and how we would respond. But this young man has had to live it," says Stanford coach Johnny Dawkins, a friend of the Smith family who recruited Nolan to Duke. "He's had to overcome and make his story something positive."

It's easy to see Smith for what he's become: an All-American candidate, an NBA draft prospect, a captain at Duke, the emotional leader of the defending national champs. But the charismatic guard wants everyone to know — especially kids like Cook, Atkins and Braswell — that the climb to get here often battered him senseless.

Not long after Derek died in 1996, Nolan found his mind swirling with questions he's never been able to resolve.

"Why? Why did God have to take him so young?" Nolan would ask. "Why couldn't he have been around for even five more years? Why can't I have him here to help me through the rough times?"

The frustration, he admits, grew most intense during times of anxiety. So at several points during his first two seasons at Duke, Nolan wondered if he had made a big mistake.

His production as a freshman was modest: he averaged just 5.9 points and 1.3 assists, playing fewer than 15 minutes per game. As a sophomore, his play was so inconsistent he lost his starting spot.

His mom would sit in



the stands at road games and hear the taunts: "Look at this: Nolan Smith, a McDonald's All-American. Sitting on the bench!"

Nolan thought long and hard about transferring, about following Dawkins to Stanford.

"I wondered, if my dad was here, would I have even chosen Duke?" Nolan says. "Would I have taken this path? Why wasn't he here to help me?"

But it was Dawkins and Tyrone Hill, both former teammates and close friends of Derek's, who refused to let Nolan race for the emergency exit. They told him to find ways to transform his dissatisfaction and doubt into motivation.

Dawkins told Nolan to stay at Duke, to invest in the vision coach Mike Krzyzewski had. Dawkins directed Nolan to take ownership of who he was.

"The major message I tried to impart on Nolan was the importance of commitment," Dawkins says. "He was in the place that was best for him. But sometimes as a young person, when things aren't going well, you wonder, 'Is this right for me?' Well, you have to run your own race. You can't get fixated on what other kids are doing at other programs. You can't look at what someone else accomplished at Duke and say, 'OK, that's what should happen for me. And if it doesn't, it must not be the right place for me.' That's nonsense."

Still, for Nolan, there was a deeper need. He wanted to hear Dawkins and Hill and his mom talk about his dad. He listened to their stories and thought about the man whose face he has tattooed on his right biceps.

The people Nolan trusted most kept telling him about Derek's toughness and competitive spirit and the way he confronted

disappointment head-on. That, they all insisted, was what made Derek so successful and so admired.

"I realized I had to come into my own as a reflection of who my father was," Nolan says. "That meant being a tough person who loved playing the game. But more importantly, it meant being someone who never ran from struggle. When I learned that's who my dad was and who I could be, I found purpose. I found me."

Quinn Cook's father, Ted, died when his heart stopped on an operating table. When that news reached Nolan, his stomach dropped.

Quinn isn't just a close friend. He's like a little brother.

Quinn's father was "Uncle Ted," a dear family friend.

Less than 10 months earlier, Nolan had thanked Uncle Ted for his support — on graduation day at Oak Hill Academy. It was a time when he experienced an exhilaration laced with sorrow similar to the one which invaded after Duke won the national title.

Nolan had arrived at his big day with his trademark grin as wide as it had ever been. He wasn't only proud to be donning his National Honor Society ropes; he was designated to lead the senior class in turning its tassels and also chosen to deliver a commencement speech.

"My message was to never be afraid to set the biggest goals possible, to always strive to be better than you think you can be," Nolan says. "I'm telling you, it was a really good speech."

But it was still a little less profound than the message Uncle Ted delivered. Realizing Nolan would be without his father on graduation day, Ted flew with Quinn from Washington to Charlotte and then drove two and a

half hours to Oak Hill.

During the graduation ceremony, Ted took a program and started writing.

"This wasn't just a small 'Congratulations' note," Monica says. "It was a letter."

Ted told Nolan how special his achievements were, how proud his dad would be. He asked Nolan to continue being a positive influence for Quinn. And he reminded Nolan that if he ever needed someone to talk to himself, he could reach out.

"That's just how caring my dad was," Quinn says. "I know he was trying his best to be a father figure for Nolan."

Four years later, Quinn is the senior at Oak Hill. Seven months from now, just like Nolan did, he will head to the stage of his high school graduation without his dad there to celebrate.

"When that happens, I'm going to do everything I can to get there," Nolan says. "I need to be there for Quinn."

On the night Ted Cook died, Quinn bolted.

As family and friends gathered at his house to deliver comfort and condolence, Quinn took off to the Run N Shoot Athletic Center and stayed until midnight.

"I didn't want to be around anybody," Quinn says. "I didn't feel like talking."

The one person Quinn knew he needed to talk to was Nolan. So in the months that followed, he talked about his pain and listened to Nolan's experiences.

When Quinn cried, Nolan reminded himself to hold it together.

"I have to be strong for him," Nolan says, "let him know we're going to get through this."

When Nolan couldn't mask his own sadness, he would cry and tell Quinn that sometimes it's OK to let it all go.

Together, they've sounded it out and agree on the greatest place to escape: the gym. Just as Nolan had often done, Quinn would head for Bowie Gym or Run N Shoot and start firing jumpers. Often they'd go together.

It wasn't just a retreat from grief. Instead, those hours spent working out were therapy sessions, ways to channel the sorrow into something productive.

That's one lesson Nolan always remembers and relays. When the pain of losing his dad stabbed at him and tried to steal his spirit, he went to the gym.

"In the gym, no one is going to talk to you about your personal life," Nolan says. "Outside of the gym, people always want to tell you, 'Oh, sorry about your dad.' They want to ask how you're doing, see if you're

holding up all right. That can hurt even more. But basketball is an escape. The gym lets you get away and focus on getting better at something you love."

Nolan Smith isn't quite sure how he arrived here. But he's thankful his life has purpose beyond basketball.

News footage taken in the moments after Derek's funeral shows a young Nolan climbing into a limo with a focused stare — too reflective and too tough for a kid.

Nolan thinks that expression came from being told by so many of his dad's close friends — John Starks, Juwan Howard, Allan Houston — that he had to step up for his mom and his sister Sydney. They told him he had to be the man of the house.

"I was 8," Nolan says

Even at 8, however, Monica insists Nolan took the responsibility seriously.

"I vividly remember him coming to sit on the side of the bed beside me," Monica says. "He wrapped his arms around me and said, 'Mom. I'm the man of the house now.' Even at such a young age, he showed such a sense of maturity and compassion."

It's a compassion Nolan feels obligated to use.

When his college days are done, Nolan is intent on expanding his reach, planning to someday start a program designed to help kids persevere through the loss of a parent. That, too, is a mission Nolan wishes he could share with Derek.

"I think sometimes people don't realize how rough this can be," Cook says. "My dad died when I was 14. Nolan was 8 when his dad (passed). We were just boys. Everything I'm fighting through, Nolan has been through. He has taught me a lot about being strong."

Last June, barely two months after winning the national title, Nolan found himself in Louisville for the 14th annual Derek Smith Shootout. During a lull in the action, he borrowed a car and drove to Derek's grave site.

It was Father's Day. For a half-hour, Nolan let loose and cried.

"But they were happy tears," he says. "I was thinking about everything I'd been through, thinking about the championship and what's ahead of me and knowing how happy my dad would have been for me. I cried because I know he was there with me."

Smith also knows now he has an obligation to others who need him. These days, as much as he wants to celebrate his own growth, he feels an urge to also teach the lessons he's learned.

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