



Taking it All in Stride

By Brennan Engle

ALUMNI PROFILE

Dr. Conrad Nightingale's love of sports medicine translates into success as Olympic runner and equine veterinarian in the Texas Hill Country

PHOTO BY BRENNAN ENGLE

After earning his DVM from K-State in 1971, Dr. Conrad Nightingale led a successful 35-year career as an equine veterinarian. But that was his second career. Prior to that he spent several years training and establishing himself as an Olympic athlete. Both endeavors emerged from his love of sports and medicine.

Growing up near the small town of Halstead, Kan., Dr. Nightingale went to a country school, where he was the only student in his class by the eighth grade. In search of entertainment, he asked his father if he could go out for sports in high school. "It kept me from milking cows," Dr. Nightingale remembered with a laugh.

It turned out to be a decision that would shape the rest of his life.

Although he competed in football, basketball and track all four years, it

was in the sport of running that Dr. Nightingale found his passion. Thanks to a lot of early morning training and good coaching, he became a two-time state high school champion in the mile, even setting the state record as a senior in 1963.

A Budding Athlete

His outstanding record earned him an offer for a full-ride track scholarship to the University of Kansas, but as a small-town kid, Dr. Nightingale felt more comfortable with K-State. "I just wasn't ready to jump into that type of college. I felt like Kansas State was more my style," he said.

DeLoss Dodds, the K-State track coach, was new to the university and Dr. Nightingale became an integral part of the program he was building. Soon the team was a force to be reckoned

with and even set a world record in the distance medley relay.

Under Dodds' coaching, Dr. Nightingale became an exceptional miler. He could complete the mile in four minutes flat, but with his eye on the Olympics, he knew he was still a few seconds short of qualifying for the Olympic team. It was then that he decided to switch to the steeplechase, a two-mile race with 35 barriers and seven water jumps. To train for the races, he built his own pit and hurdles. His hard work paid off and he began consistently finishing in the top three in the country in the steeplechase.

In 1968 Dr. Nightingale and several Olympic-bound athletes became involved in unique scientific study. Dr. Jack Daniels, a professor and coach, was asked by the Olympic Committee to research high-altitude training on the

Right: A young Dr. Conrad Nightingale trains while on the track team at K-State in the 1960s. **Below:** In a photo from the 1967 K-State Royal Purple yearbook, Dr. Nightingale was featured as the Mike Ahearn Athletic Man of the Year, and Most Inspirational Track Team Athlete for setting conference and national records in the mile. He was also commended for giving off-campus talks for Christian Athletes and holding an office in the Pre-Veterinary Club.

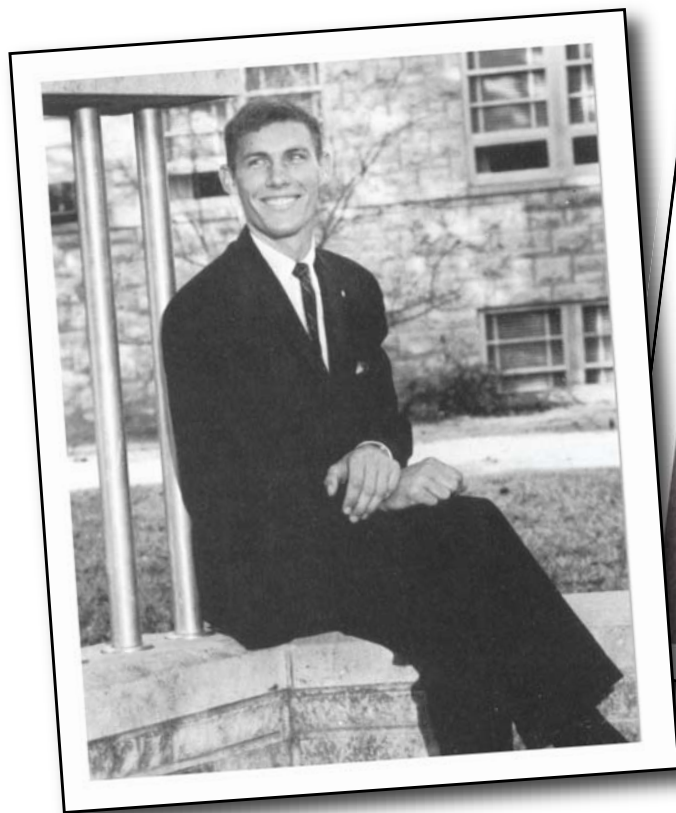


PHOTO COURTESY K-STATE ARCHIVES

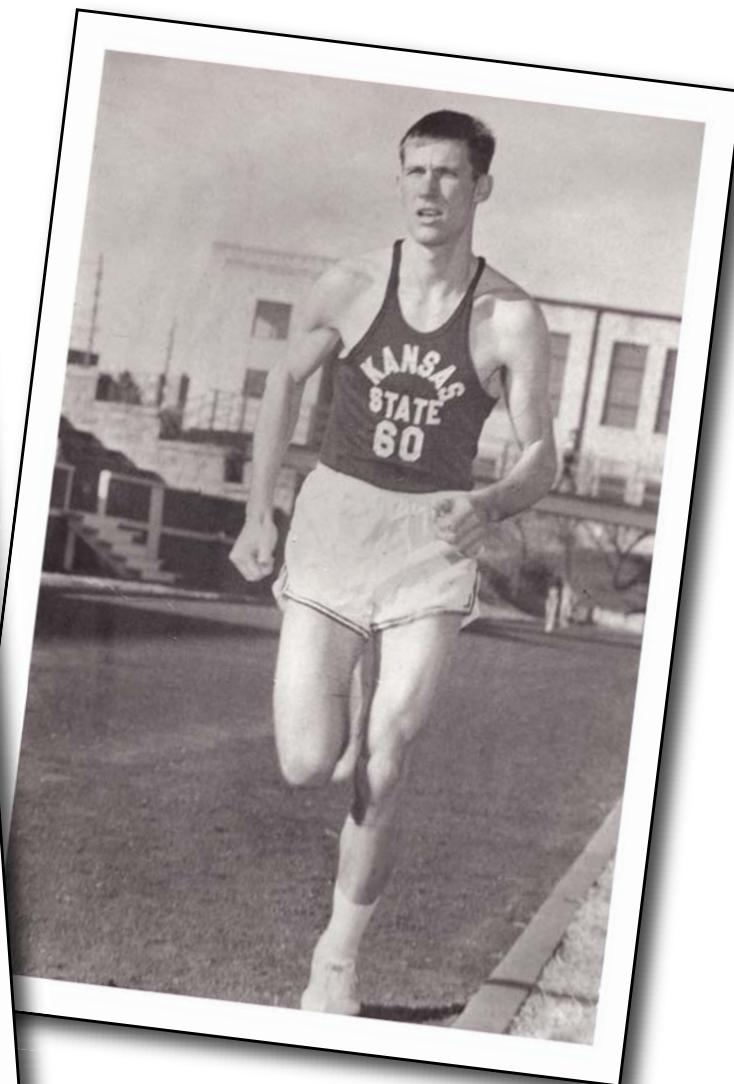


PHOTO COURTESY CONRAD NIGHTINGALE

athletes because the Olympics were to be held in Mexico City, Mexico, 7,300 feet above sea level. This group was comprised of a half-dozen of the world's best distance runners including Dr. Nightingale and Jim Ryun, who had achieved fame as the fastest miler in the world and later served as a congressman from Kansas to the U.S. House of Representatives from 1997 to 2007.

Dr. Daniels conducted studies on the athletes in Ann Arbor, Mich., at sea level, and later at high altitudes in Alamosa, Colo. He measured gas levels using breathing samples taken from the runners at various altitudes. "He made some correlations that allowed us to train better at high altitudes and become prepared for the huge oxygen deficit we would be faced with in the race," Dr. Nightingale said.

The high-altitude training turned out

to be ideal for the runners as the Olympic Trials were held in mountainous South Lake Tahoe, Calif. Dr. Daniels had taught Dr. Nightingale the ultimate ability of how to "pace himself" without expending any unnecessary energy, especially by sprinting. "I ran like Jack Daniels instructed us, and I think that helped me get on the Olympic team, Dr. Nightingale said. "We weren't afraid of running at altitude."

The Opportunity of a Lifetime

By that time, Dr. Nightingale was preparing to enter his second year of veterinary school and needed permission from the dean and his instructors to miss the first six weeks of school to participate in the 1968 Olympics. Permission was granted.

"At that time the administration was

very sports oriented and wanted to have athletes at K-State," Dr. Nightingale said. "My classmate, Dr. Jim Fountaine, took notes long-hand and mailed them to me. When I got back I was given just one test in each class for the semester."

In October 1968 Dr. Nightingale competed in the Olympics in Mexico City, a location with 30 percent less oxygen than sea level. He finished sixth in his qualifying heat but unfortunately didn't make the finals.

He had come a long way from Halstead to participate in the Olympics. He made life-long friends and stays in contact with many of them including his friend, Jim Ryun. "I had a great time. It was a wonderful experience," Dr. Nightingale said. "Especially to know you were up against the best in the world. I came back and had a lot of opportunities to speak to youth groups

and tell kids from small towns they can do great things if they just apply themselves.”

Finding His Place

After earning his DVM in 1971, Dr. Nightingale joined the Air Force and served as base veterinarian at Lackland Air Force Base in San Antonio, Texas. He and wife, Nancy, fell in love with the hill country and he bought a practice in Bandera, 30 miles northwest of San Antonio. The Hill Country Veterinary Hospital and Equine Center has been Dr. Nightingale’s practice since 1973.

He developed an interest in equine sports medicine because many of the principles of training that he learned as an athlete apply to horses as well.

For many years Bandera had a race track, Bandera Downs, which kept him and two other associates consistently busy. He especially enjoyed evaluating and treating lameness cases. “The most challenging thing in my career has been to try to identify where the medical problem is,” he explained. “Probably the biggest adrenaline rush I get is to see an animal that I’ve worked on perform to its capability.”

A Progressive Veterinarian

In his quest to provide state-of-the-art treatment, Dr. Nightingale has remained at the cutting edge. In 1982 he was one of the first veterinarians in Texas to learn and perform arthroscopic surgery. He was also among the first to offer ultrasound, CO2 laser, digital radiology and shockwave therapies. “It has helped my diagnostic ability and allows me to offer the client and patient the best care possible.”

Perhaps even more unique, Dr. Nightingale has embraced non-traditional treatments including acupuncture and chiropractic techniques. His interest in those therapies can be traced back through his family heritage. His grandfather was a homeopathic “doctor” in a rural Kansas community at a time when professional clinicians were rare. “When people had sick animals he’d put his hands on them to find out what was wrong with them. I think he probably



PHOTO COURTESY CONRAD NIGHTINGALE

In 2005 Dr. Nightingale performed one of the first arthroscopic surgeries in Romania while on a trip with the Christian Veterinary Mission.

gave some of those genes to me. I like to think he did anyway.”

His strong faith has led Dr. Nightingale to become involved with the Christian Veterinary Mission, an organization that helps provide knowledge, skills and resources for people in developing countries to care for their animals. In 2005 he traveled to Romania with a team of veterinarians and per-

formed the first arthroscopic surgeries in that country.

don’t hurry, but I try to operate as quickly as possible.”

A New Phase

After Bandera Downs closed in 1993, Dr. Nightingale went back to a one-man practice but his reputation as an equine practitioner meant that business would find him. He also treats small animals as well. He likes that Bandera remains a small town, even though an increasing number of people are moving

to the community, seeking refuge from the metropolitan San Antonio.

At their home, located next door to their clinic, the Nightingales raised their three children, Amie, Todd and Abby. They now have a granddaughter, Catherine.

Dr. Nightingale continued running for recreation, but eventually the impact on his joints from running and working on horses over the years caught up with him. “That put a lot of trauma on my body,” he said.

In 2003 he competed in a 5K run in his hometown of Halstead, but it would be his last race. Shortly after, he had two knee replacements and a shoulder replacement.

“I didn’t know it would be my last race, but it turned out to be an appropriate place to participate in my last athletic event, to sort of close the circle.”

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“Time is Trauma”

Dr. Nightingale remembers his veterinary education at K-State fondly. “Going to K-State was the right thing for me because the instructors had good ethics, and they gave us confidence in what they expected of us.”

He still practices advice he learned from Dr. John Noordsy, a longtime professor of large animal surgery. “He taught us that time is trauma. The more time we spend with an animal under anesthesia, the less successful we’re going to be. I still remember that. I