

Lessons from the Olympics

Hebrews 12:1-2

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Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross.

Hebrews 12:1-2 NRSV

Do you see what this means - all these pioneers who blazed the way, all these veterans cheering us on? It means we'd better get on with it. Strip down, start running - and never quit! No extra spiritual fat.

Hebrews 12:1 The Message

The Tokyo Olympics end today. The Olympics – the word conjures up all kinds of images. Who watched at least two events over the last few weeks? It was harder to figure out when and how to watch this year which was frustrating. There were new events – skateboarding, surfing. I look forward to the Olympics – both summer and winter. The spectacle, the amazing athletes, their stories, their incredible feats. I have some special memories. I was living in Southern CA in 1984 when the Olympics were in Los Angeles. There was a lottery for tickets. We managed to get 2 tickets for women's gymnastics and we watched Mary Lou Retton compete. And we got two tickets for men's diving. Greg Louganis went to my high school. I am a horse lover so my dad said – Let's put our name in for dressage. It was thrilling.

This year was so different. Pandemic worries – positive tests, who could come, who would be quarantined, high numbers in Japan and Tokyo. No crowds cheering people on. Opening ceremonies were not a spectacle in the same way. Masks instead of smiles. Still inspirational.

Now that they are ending what might we learn from them for our inner lives, our spiritual journeys? How might they help us to see more clearly who the Holy One calls us to be?

The writer of Hebrews felt there was a connection between running and faith, between ancient Olympic events and trust in the Holy One even when there were obstacles. The writer of the letter to the Hebrews may have been Paul or a follower of Paul. Probably written around 63 AD (CE) before destruction of the temple.

The ancient Olympics set a context for our passage from the letter to the Hebrews. In Ancient Greece, games and sport competitions were part of many religious festivities. Competing in sports and athletic endeavors were considered ways of honoring the gods. Athletes were superstars and revered.

The Roman writer Juvenal complained that teachers did not receive the kind of respect they deserved. “He bitterly calculates that musicians and popular athletes earn more in a day than the teacher does in a year.” Sound familiar? Not all musicians of course!

When the games first started they lasted 5 days. In the earliest Greek games there was just one competition: the stadium race. This was a distance of 192 meters, about the length of two football fields. (1) This is the image the writer of Hebrews had in mind when he wrote *Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us.*

There were other types of running events, but the *stadion* was the most prestigious; the winner was often considered to be the winner of an entire Games. Though a separate event, the *stadion* was also part of the ancient Pentathlon.

The writer of Hebrews suggests that the metaphor of running this race as people follow the ways of Jesus was important. Running, moving, participating.... Not winning, not outdoing others. Christ as the perfecter, the best one who runs the course with us.

The writer leads up to this metaphor with list of people who have run this race of faith before with perseverance. Some might call them Heroes of the faith. Are they perfectly spiritually healthy people? No.

- Gideon, was an altogether reluctant warrior. He was not confident in his own ability and he asked for proof that it was even the God talking to him at all. (Judges 6-8)
- Samson, for all of his superhuman strength, does not come off as all that bright and as his story comes to a close, he dies making his point. (Judges 16)
- David was, of course, the ‘ideal king’ for the nation of Israel, but for all of his remarkable gifts, he committed adultery and arranged for the death of Bathsheba’s husband. (2 Samuel 11:1-12:25)

All of these whose stories of ‘running this race of faith’ are passed along to us are far less than perfect. In fact, some of them stumble and fall in rather remarkable ways. Perhaps it is so that these are named so that all of us — regardless of our strengths, our weaknesses, our successes, our failures,— all of us are called by God to simply get in ‘the race’ and trust that God will be with us. And maybe by simply being ‘in the race’ we are among those who are ‘persevering.’

Athletes remind us of the fullness of participating, of running, swimming, jumping, leaving it all on the field.

What gets in the way of your 'entering the race' in all of its fullness? What doubts or fears plague you? Who is cheering you on? What kept you 'running' moving, one foot in front of the other, slow or fast, daily? What keeps you 'running?'

In this late summer days when at least some of our attention is focused on the Summer Olympics, are there stories which capture your imagination? Of lessons we learn. which might help illustrate what it is to 'run the race?'

1) We compete and we are friends who help each other even when we fall

The Tokyo Olympics took an unexpected twist for Isaiah Jewett and Nijel Amos on Sunday when they found themselves sprawled on the track next to each other during the 800 meters semifinal. The two athletes had taken a tumble while rounding the final turn and for the briefest moment, it appeared as though their bid for an Olympic medal was over. However, what followed was a heartwarming display of sportsmanship. Turning to each other, the American and Botswanan runners helped one another to their feet and finished the race together. Jewett and Amos crossed the finish line 54 seconds behind the winner. (2)

2) See Sports as a Calling, A Discipline and A Joy

Five weeks after setting a world record and becoming the first woman to finish under 52 seconds in the 400-meter hurdles (51.90), 21 year old from New Jersey Sydney McLaughlin went even faster in the Tokyo Olympic final. She crossed in 51.46 seconds to lower the world's best time, and become an Olympic champion in the process. Compatriot Dalilah Muhammad, the reigning world and Olympic champion, placed second in 51.58, which also would have set a new world record.

McLaughlin said, "Just trusting the process. Giving the glory to God. It's all, this season, hard work and dedication. And I'm just really grateful to be able to represent my country and to have this opportunity. I feel like I was born to run." (3)

3) Valuing the Whole Person – We are Beloved. That is who we are

Simone Biles is certainly one of the greatest athletes. A phenomenal gymnast in every respect. There was pressure to be perfect in every event going into the Olympics. But she took a step back. She realized she was not focused and was struggling. There are twisties where you don't know where your body is in the air. It is both physical and mental health issue. She said something profound. On July 28 she tweeted – "The outpouring love & support I've received has made me realize I'm more than my accomplishments and gymnastics which I never truly believed before." She is right. We admire her and cheer her on. And she is more than her accomplishments. (4)

4) Cheer each other on

Winning and Competition can bring out the best. They are often over emphasized. In the Olympics we saw many moments of athletes sharing in each other's successes -

Park skateboarding, Swimming. Teammates doing this for each other especially because there was not a great cloud of witness, no cheering fans. Other swimmers congratulating Tatjana Schoenmaker from South Africa for beating the world record.

5) All can run the race – inclusive. The Refugee Olympic Team

Not from a specific race or tribe or group or nation in a time of much nationalism. Part of the vision of kin-dom – a place at the table and a spot on the team to run the race. There 29 athletes on this time currently living in refugee camps. People whose country of origin are Syria, South Sudan, Congo, Iran. Any one of their individual stories could offer a shining example of perseverance in life and in the sport which has called their name. Started in 2016 in Rio and now again.

IOC President Thomas Bach said: “These refugees have no home, no team, no flag, no national anthem. We will offer them a home in the Olympic Village together with all the athletes of the world. The Olympic anthem will be played in their honour and the Olympic flag will lead them into the Olympic Stadium....” “This will be a symbol of hope for all the refugees in our world, and will make the world better aware of the magnitude of this crisis. It is also a signal to the international community that refugees are our fellow human beings and are an enrichment to society. These refugee athletes will show the world that, despite the unimaginable tragedies they have faced, anyone can contribute to society through their talent, skills and strength of the human spirit.” (5)

5) Joy of being who you are, fully present, bring beauty in unique ways. Fully who you are Britain’s Tom Daley is a champion diver. came out as gay in 2013. Role model. Diving champion. He won a gold medal in the synchronized 10-meter platform dive. But what he was known for was casually knitting a pouch for his gold medal. Tom Daley said it was knitting and crochet that helped him get through the lockdown during last year. And he knit an Olympic sweater. (6)

The writer of Hebrews invited this new community of faith to imagine themselves as runners, as athletes, whose spiritual fitness would be needed over the long haul. Not winning, not outdoing each other, but knowing the Holy One would sustain them. They encourage each other.

I will close with a favorite moment. Those two athletes who agreed to share gold medals in the Olympics men’s high jump competition. Italy’s Gianmarco Tamberi and Mutaz Barshim of Qatar were locked in first place after a tough few hours of competing on Sunday. The two athletes, who are also good friends, were then given the option to settle matters with a jump-off. Barshim had a better idea: how about two golds? The official said that was possible. Tamberi instantly accepted, slapping Barshim’s hand and jumping into his arms. Tamberi then belly-flopped hard onto the track, rolled around a few times and screamed. “I still can’t believe it happened,” he said. “Sharing with a friend is even more beautiful ... It was just magical.” (7)

Meaningful sportsmanship and discipleship and spiritual life may be like that here. May we continue to be a place and community where we can run the race and walk the paths in Divine Love together. Amen

- 1) <https://www.worldhistory.org/Stadium/>
- 2) <https://scoop.upworthy.com/american-botswanan-runners-help-each-other-finish-race-after-tripping-tokyo-olympics>
- 3) <https://sportspectrum.com/sport/olympics/2021/08/03/sydney-mclaughlin-glory-god-olympic-gold/>
- 4) <https://www.theguardian.com/sport/2021/jul/28/simone-biles-support-message-gymnastics-withdrawal-tokyo-2020-olympics#:~:text=%E2%80%9C%5BT%5Dhe%20outpouring%20love,wrote%20on%20Twitter%20on%20Thursday.>
- 5) <https://www.theguardian.com/sport/2016/aug/05/helplessness-rio-hope-olympic-refugee-team>
<https://olympics.com/ioc/news/29-refugee-athletes-to-send-a-message-of-solidarity-and-hope-to-the-world-at-the-olympic-games-tokyo-2020>
- 6) . https://scoop.upworthy.com/great-britain-tom-daley-diver-casually-knitting-a-pouch-gold-medal-olympics-lgbtq-crochet?fbclid=IwAR1io_ZTcZJvb2rh-ocyqy9M759s6Xp1f1xtdex7SfEVZEdn27a0fw8flQk
- 7) <https://www.sott.net/article/456313-Just-magical-Joy-for-Tamberi-and-Barshim-as-they-opt-to-share-gold-in-mens-high-jump>