**29th July 2012 – ON YOUR MARKS!**

**1 Cor 9.24-27; Hebrews 12.1-2**

Billions of people around the world tuned into the opening ceremony of 30th Olympiad, which started in London on Friday evening. After all the hype and expense and controversy the Games have finally begun.

The Apostle Paul was familiar with the Ancient Olympics, and just like a good preacher today, the apostle Paul sometimes used sports allusions to illustrate his sermons and writings.

For example:

* *Do you not know that those who run in a race all run, but only one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may obtain it. And everyone who competes for the prize is temperate in all things. Now they do it to obtain a perishable crown, but we for an imperishable crown. Therefore I run thus: not with uncertainty. Thus I fight: not as one who beats the air. But I discipline my body and bring it into subjection, lest when I have preached to others, I myself should become disqualified—1 Corinthians 9:24-27.*
* *For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places—*Ephesians 6:12
* *And also if anyone competes in athletics, he is not crowned unless he competes according to the rules—2 Timothy 2:5*
* *I have fought the good fight. I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Finally, there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will give to me on that Day, and not to me only but also to all who have loved His appearing—*2 Timothy 4:7-8.

We therefore have biblical warrant for drawing spiritual lessons from the world of athletics, and perhaps even from the Olympic Games themselves. So today I’d like to share with you some lessons we can learn from stories we read from the history of the modern Olympic Games.

The stores of five Olympians and from them we can glean some great truths.

**Eric Liddell: Meet with the Coach Each Morning**

It almost goes without saying that when we think of the modern Olympics and Christians in the same sentence, we think of Eric Liddell, the Flying Scotsman. Liddell represented Britain in the 1924 Paris Olympics. When he learned the heats were to be run on Sunday, he declared that he could not run on Sundays as it would violate his convictions regarding the Sabbath. He switched to the 400 meter competition where he won a gold medal. His story has been made famous in the movie *Chariots of Fire.* Famously Liddell When the day of the Olympic 400 metres race came, Liddell went to the starting blocks, where an American Olympic Team masseur slipped a piece of paper into his hand with a quotation from [1 Samuel](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1_Samuel) 2:30: "Those who honour me I will honour’.

What many people don’t know is that after the Olympics, he followed in his parents’ footsteps as a missionary to China. It was there during World War II that he was interned in the Weishien Concentration Camp where he died while serving Christ Jesus. He gave up a comfortable life in Scotland and the chance to defend his Olympic title to help boys in China get a better education.

While in the Japanese prison camp, he lived for others. One of his roles was to organize sports for the kids. When a group of teenagers wanted to play hockey one Sunday, Eric said that they could have the equipment but he would not be there to umpire. They decided to organise a hockey game by themselves despite him—boys against girls. It ended in a fight because there was no umpire. On the following Sunday, Eric turned out on that field to act as umpire.

This incident speaks volumes about Eric. As Sally Magnusson put it in her book, The Flying Scotsman, “He would not run on a Sunday for an Olympic gold medal in the 100 meters and all the glory in the world; but he refereed a game on Sunday, he broke his unbreakable principle, just to keep a handful of imprisoned youngsters at peace with each other.” There will be many great champions in the 2008 Olympics, but will there be any of the integrity and character of Eric Liddell.

Sally Magnusson, in her biography of Liddell, explained the secret of his radiant life: “Every morning about 6 a.m., with curtains tightly drawn to keep in the shining of our peanut-oil lamp… he used to climb out of his top bunk, past the sleeping forms of his dormitory mates. Then, at the small Chinese table, (he would sit) with the light just enough to illumine (his) Bibles and notebooks. Silently (he) read, prayed, and thought about the day's duties, noted what should be done. Eric was a man of prayer...”

That was his great secret. He knew how to devote his mornings to meeting with his divine Coach. There are many lessons that can be drawn from Eric Liddell’s life, but chief among them is this: Champions for God often devote their morning hours to spending time with Him. As Eric Liddell knew, when we begin the morning with God, we can enjoy His presence all day long. As Henry Ward Beecher said, “The first hour of the morning is the rudder of the day.”

Debbie Flood has been announced as the joint winner of the 2012 Eric Liddell Award.The award honours one male and female athlete for outstanding character at home, in the community, and on and off the field of competition

Flood is the two-time British Olympic silver medallist in rowing and tomorrow she could win gold in the quadruple sculls.

She co-founded Creativity in Sport, a community interest organisation giving at-risk youth, opportunities to study positive life skills curriculum and work toward fitness teaching qualification.

Motivated by a desire to work with troubled youth, she took a year off from rowing in 2009 to qualify as a prison officer.

Commenting on the award, she said: "Eric Liddell was a great man of faith and an example of an ambassador of God both in and outside sport.

"God has given me the gifts and abilities that I have and I have tried to use them to the best of my ability while also sharing my faith through how I play my sport on and off the water."

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"My faith is really important to me. I look back on my life and see that I have been put in these places which appear to be random, but as I see it I have found something that I am really good at and God has put me here as a witness for him. He has got my life in his hands and this is where he is taking me," she said.

**James Connolly: Persevere Through Difficulties**

All athletes have to persevere through struggles, injuries and setbacks. The very first Olympic champion in the history of the modern games is an American named James Connolly, the first person to win a gold medal after the resumption of the games in 1896.

James Connolly, was at Harvard University in 1896 when rumours spread that the ancient Olympics would be reborn in Athens. Some students were granted permission to attend the Olympics. But when James asked for the same privilege, the school refused. So he quit Harvard and left for Europe aboard a German steamer. The other athletes were on board, too, but they had lots of funding and could travel first class. James found himself far below deck in a cramped, musty, dank cabin with little food. He suffered terribly from seasickness.

James was no sooner off the boat in Naples then he’d been robbed by a pickpocket. He arrived in Athens exhausted, penniless, frazzled. He was weak and out of shape. But at least he had two weeks to recover from the trip. That’s when he suffered his next shock. The Greeks used a different calendar than the Americans, and Olympic competition was set to begin the very next day!

When morning came, James dragged himself out of bed for the opening ceremonies and stood for hours in the blazing sun awaiting the arrival of the King of Greece. When the games began, James’ event, the triple jump, was first on the schedule. “I don’t know if I can manage even one jump,” James said. “I’m exhausted.”

But his teammate pulled him aside. “I’ve seen you make it this far despite all the problems you’ve had getting here,” said his friend. “And I’ve seen you jump. There’s no one here who can beat you. Just remember. You’re representing Americans now.”

As the competition proceeded, James watched his opponents. The French jumper had the best marks, a triple jump of 41 feet, 8 inches. Walking to the edge of the runway, James’ threw his cap a yard beyond his opponent’s distance. A rush of adrenaline came, along with a fresh surge of confidence. Racing down the runway, James leaped into the air and to everyone’s amazement, his triple jump measured nearly 45 feet—beyond even where he had thrown his cap.

Leaping to their feet, the thousands of spectators began roaring, “Nike! Nike!”

“What does that mean?” asked James. The judge said, “That means victory.” That afternoon, James Connolly stood on the victor’s stand and was awarded the silver medal, at that time signifying first place. Not only did he become America’s first Olympic hero, he was the first Olympic champion of modern times.

I really wish that the Christian life was just a short sprint. Personally, I think it would be a lot easier to finish if it was, but it’s not.
The Christian life is more like the marathon race. It’s a long race. A hard race. And it’s one thing to enter a marathon but it’s another thing to finish the race. And there are many people who jump on the Jesus’ bandwagon but never finish the race.
In marathon running it’s called “hitting the wall.” And that’s when the runner basically runs out of gas. And life is full of “hitting the wall” experiences: death, divorce, disasters.

When we run our race, no matter whether we finish with a flourish or merely limp across the line, it means gold, because we are following in the steps of Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith. I know it gets scary sometimes, but don’t lose heart. Paul says in Romans, And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.”

Sadly some do lose faith.

Joanthon Edwards broke the world record n the triple jump and won gold at the Sydney Olympics in 2000. He was a committed Christian even presenting Songs of Praise, but has since lost his faith

In an interview in [*The Times*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Times) on 27 June 2007, Edwards said: "If there is no God, does that mean that life has no purpose? Does it mean that personal existence ends at death? They are thoughts that do my head in."

There will be difficult times. Far be for anyone to judge – we are all different – we all need compassion. All athletes have difficult times. There will be darkness. Jesus said his light shines in the darkness – but there will still be darkness. The light may only be very small – but the light still shines. Keep running towards the light – keep your eyes fixed on the prize, the prize that will last.

**Jesse Owens: Nurture the Right Friends**

Another famous Olympian was Jesse Owns, who humiliated Adolf Hitler at the 1936 Olympics in Berlin. Hitler disliked black athletes and felt they were inferior to Arians.

Jesse Owens was an African-American track star whose main event was the Long Jump. But Owens was having trouble with that event in Berlin. In the qualifying rounds, he missed two times.. One more miss, and he would be eliminated from competition. His main competitor was a German named Lutz Long.

Lutz Long walked over to Jesse Owens and chatted with him for a few moments. “Something must be bothering you,” Long said. “You should be able to qualify with your eyes closed. Owens explained that he hadn’t realized that his first jump counted as a qualifying attempt. That had so rattled him that he overcompensated in his second jump.

Long said, “Since the distance you need to qualify isn’t that difficult, make a mark about a foot before you reach the foul line. Use that as your jump-off point. That way you won’t foul.”

Jesse did just that. He used his foot to dig a mark in the grass next about a foot short of the foul line, and he used that as his jump-off spot. He qualified that time with a couple of feet to spare.

Later that afternoon, Jesse Owens and Lutz Long went head-to-head in competition. It was nip-and-tuck to the end, but when Jesse Owens won the gold metal, Hitler reportedly scowled, but Lutz Long ran over and threw his arms around him in congratulations. Years later, Jesse Owens talked about that moment, and he said, “You could melt down all the medals and cups I have and they wouldn’t match the 24-carot friendship I felt for Lutz Long at that moment.”

The two men became good friends and stayed in touch, even during World War II when the two nations were locked in a terrible war with each other. Lutz was a lieutenant in the German Army, but he wrote to Owens and said, “I hope we can always remain best of friends despite the differences between our countries.”

It was the last communication the two of the ever shared, for just a few days later, Lutz was killed in battle. But the story doesn’t end there. Years later, Owens received a letter from Lutz Long’s son, who was then 22-years old and getting married. The letter said, “Even though my father can’t be here to be my best man, I know who he would want in his place. He would want someone that he and his entire family admired and respected. He would want you to take his place. And I do, too.”

And Jesse Owens flew to Germany to be the best man at the wedding of the son of his former arch competitor and rival.

Friends are important, and that we must carefully guard and nourish our friendships. The Bible says that love never fails. The letter of the Hebrews uses the analogy of a stadium of people cheering you on – as you bear witness to your faith and hold on to what is right and good. We need support and friendship to run the race. Jesus says lean on me…

**Christine Ohuruogu (GB)**

won gold at the last Olympics in the 400meteres. She is an East London girl. She has said “I could literally walk to the stadium from my mum’s house.” She has a strong Christian faith and has said: “I tend to worry a lot. I like it when Jesus says: ‘Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest’. As a sports person you can get overwhelmed by everything that is going on – and especially in a championship environment. But it is nice to have that safety net [of Jesus saying], ‘If you are worried, come to me and it will be all right.’”

**Lawrence Lemieux: Rescue the Perishing**

One of the most incredible stories coming from the Olympics occurred during the 1988 games in Seoul, South Korea. A Canadian named Lawrence Lemieux, was in the sailing event going for gold. The sea was stormy and rough, but Lemieux was in second place with an excellent shot at first. Suddenly his attention was drawn aside by an overturned boat, and he saw a sailor draped over the hull, desperately trying to hold on. Another sailor was bobbing in the water. The tides and winds were pushing both men further out to sea. One man had cut his hand and was rapidly losing strength. The crewman in the water was drifting away from the boat and going down. Lemieux had a heart-rending decision to make. If he didn’t stop to help the men, they would likely drown; but if he did stop and help them he would lose his lifelong dream of winning an Olympic Gold Medal. Well, it might have been a heart-rending decision, but it didn’t take the young champion long to make it. He turned his boat toward the desperate men. As he approached the man who was thrashing in the water, the man gasped, “Please help me! I can’t last much longer.”

Somehow he managed to navigate his boat through the crashing waves and managed to rescue the men.

But the delay cost him any chance he had of winning an Olympic medal. He resumed the race, but finished in 21st place. In its place, the International Olympic Committee awarded him The Fair Play Award of the 1988 games in Seoul. And when he returned home, the members of Northwood Presbyterian Church in Washington, had a special medal cast for him and draped it around his neck while the Canadian National Anthem was played. He told the congregation, “You spend your whole lifetime trying to achieve a goal, and my goal was winning a gold medal. I didn’t win a gold medal, but I won something more valuable—the love you’ve shown me here today.”

While everyone else in the world is trying to win medals, accomplish goals, accumulate prizes, and achieve status, we have a different mission, don’t we—to rescue the perishing and care for the dying, to love our neighbour, to glorify God in word and deed.

What is your life goal? What are you willing to work at to become the Christian disciple that our God invites us to be? What does it mean to you to win your race, to be the kind of person you most want to be? Do you have a vision of the kind of person you would like to be?

**Felix Carvajal: Finish Well**

When the Olympic Games were held in St. Louis in 1904, there was an unusual entry in the Marathon. A small Cuban mail carrier named Felix Carvajal announced one day to his fellow postal workers that he was going to travel to the United States and win the Marathon for Cuba.

No one took him seriously, but somehow he collected enough money for the trip.

He had no running clothes and no running shoes, only heavy street shoes. He knew nothing about running and had no experience in track and field.

It was a sweltering day; the heat and humidity were oppressive. One by one, many of the other runners collapsed. One American runner nearly died. Felix, however, being from Cuba, thought nothing of the blistering conditions. He fairly skipped along, laughing and sometimes even pausing to joke with spectators along the way.

With only two miles to go, Felix had a huge lead. He was running alongside an orchard and he spotted some apples. They fairly beckoned to him, and he stopped to eat some of them. They were green, and soon he was stricken with severe stomach cramps. He lost the lead, though he did come in fourth, doubled-over with pain. Of the thirty-one starters that day, only fourteen finished, and Felix was fourth among them.

The Apostle Paul said: kept his eyes on the prize to the end, writing to Timothy near the end of his life, saying, “I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.”

Let’s rededicate ourselves to meeting with the coach each morning, persevering through difficulties, nurturing the right friends, rescuing the perishing, and finishing well. Let us run with patience the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith.

**This Sermon uses material from ‘Going for Gold’ by Robert J. Morgan** "Copyright (2004) The Donelson Fellowship