**Champions of Ordinary Time**

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By Lucia A. Silecchia

In recent days, the eyes of sports lovers have been turned toward Paris for the 2024 Summer Olympic Games.

I have to admit that the Olympics excited me much more when I was younger. When they used to be scheduled every four years, the games seemed rare and special. But, once the summer and winter games were separated and there is an Olympics every two years, it feels more common. There is always an Olympics in the recent past or near future.

Beyond that, with age has come more cynicism as political tensions, scandals involving coaches and players, and bouts of poor sportsmanship mar a tradition of athletic competition with origins in ancient Greece. This year, in particular, the opening ceremonies of the Olympic games were deeply insulting to Christians, diminishing my interest in the games a bit more.

Yet, despite all cynicism, each time the Olympics roll around there are inspiring stories of the human spirit that emerge. It is these stories, far more than mere athletic achievement, that capture hearts worldwide.

Sometimes the story that emerges is one of an athlete who overcame poverty, discouragement, or hard times to rise to the top of his or her field. Sometimes the story is a remarkable comeback victory for someone whose best days seemed long past. Sometimes, the story is one of an improbable win for a mighty underdog or a return to the arena after an injury or personal setback. Sometimes the story is an inspiring tale of teamwork or of family support and sacrifice that made a dream come true. Sometimes the story is one of noble sportsmanship. Sometimes the story is a tear-filled farewell from a beloved veteran athlete.

So often, it is not the physical victories on the court, field, balance beam or diving board that I remember. Rather, it is the human stories of challenges met and overcome and the stories of hard work, gritty determination and sacrifice that make the Olympics what they are at their best.

Yet, in many ways, it is the same type of stories that we see in the “everyday” people who fill our lives. They will never know a stadium full of cheering fans, a gold medal around their neck, a lucrative endorsement deal, their photo on a cereal box, or the patriotic welcome from their proud countries. Yet, I know that my life is filled with the inspiring stories of those unsung champions I see every day.

I have known people who live with challenges of all kinds and, with grace and good cheer, overcome them and achieve things never thought possible.

I have known people who were dismissed as incapable, weak, or past their prime who outshone others when put to the test.

I have known people who suffered from setbacks that would make giving up perfectly understandable – and who did not let suffering overwhelm them.

I have known people who, with great personal sacrifice, put their own dreams aside to help family members and friends to achieve improbable goals.

I have known people who, in the great sportsmanship of life, do the right thing whether or not anyone is watching.

Perhaps the lives that such people live are not the stuff of great drama or widespread admiration. Yet, to know such people is one of the great blessings of my life.

As the Olympics wind down, the athletes will return home. Some will long be remembered in the lore of their sport and in the record books of the Olympics. Others will fade from the public eye, and many will see their records and victories surpassed in their own lifetimes.

But those everyday heroes who live lives with quiet victories and everyday triumphs leave a legacy of their own. Those of us blessed to know them will see and remember the example that they set. If we are wise, we will follow their examples in the ways we live our own lives. If we have the opportunity, we can call them to the attention of those inclined to be impressed only by the splashy, flashy victories that get all the attention in a distracted world. And, in the quiet of our hearts, we can give thanks for the champions of ordinary time.

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