

Olympic Preparation

Hebrews 10:39 - 11:38

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It's still a few months before the Winter Olympics and more than 2 years before the next summer Olympics ... but people are already starting to get ready... there are building projects and athletes are well into their training.

Do you have a favourite olympic sport?

One of mine is running. I was a long-distance runner for years. One trick I learned early on in long-distance running is to keep a regular focus, a regular target to aim at. I know that running may not be that fun to watch, but I often imagined myself out there with them, running along, looking for the next target to keep in mind.

But my how the Olympics have changed! Yes, running was there at the beginning. But, three of the favourite Olympic sports when the Olympics first began were wrestling, boxing, and the pancratium. Wrestling and boxing I'm sure you know. The pancratium was a combination of both but with the added flavour that you could kick and strangle your opponent.

Also, these sports were played -- if you can call this play -- at the very hottest part of the day and with no time-outs or rounds. They were "designed to be as physically taxing and uncomfortable as possible. This meant no time limits, no rounds, no rest periods, no respite from the midsummer sun" (Poliakoff 2008, 13). It was said that "boxers could bear their opponents' blows" better than they could bear horrible heat (Poliakoff 2008, 14).

"Nor were there weight classes." So, ambitious but little athletes entered the match with very little chance of success. And when the almost inevitable happened, "the superior athlete was unlikely to show mercy. Some athletes were so terrifying that their opponents simply defaulted, allowing them to win ... without having to get dirty." (Poliakoff 2008, 14) When the wrestler Tiberius Claudius Marcianus "undressed, all his opponents begged to be dismissed from the contest." (Poliakoff 2008, 15). But if the contest did go ahead, the Greek or Roman spectators witnessed unparalleled, vicious, hand-to-hand combat.

How do you think you'd do in these games? Pretty rough, eh? These sports resembled mixed martial arts more than they do Olympic competition today. Most people in North America would probably turn away in disgust. But, to the Greeks and to the Romans, who inherited the Olympics from the Greeks, these combat sports embodied everything that they found glorious and beautiful.

Here's a good measure reason why the Olympics have changed. The founder of the modern Olympics, Baron Coubertin wrote these lines, which I think some of you have heard about the athletes of the modern Olympics:

For when the One Great Scorer comes
to mark against your name,
He writes—not that you won or lost—
but how you played the Game.

Have you heard that before? It's not whether you "won or lost— but how you played the Game". That's the spirit of the modern Olympics. You're not to hurt the other person, but play your own game well. "According to the guidelines of the Atlantic branch of the U.S. Amateur Boxing Association, "The main objective of Olympic-style boxing's rules and the actions and decisions of the referee is the safety and protection of boxers" (Poliakoff 2008, 16).

Wow! That couldn't be farther from the mind of the ancient Greek or Roman. How you play the game? The safety of the boxer? What was prized in the first Olympics was the shedding of blood to show who had won and who had lost. Here's an inscription from just before the time of Jesus: "A boxer's victory is gained in blood". The question is not how you play the game. It's whether you win or lose that matters.

Why did it matter? Because the Olympics were intended to be the preparatory battlefield on which men would show whether they were prepared or not for the real battlefield, the combat of war. The Olympics were the preparation for the battlefield on which there would be no question of whether you fought well or not: the question was: who would win or lose in a battle for our country? The winning Olympic athletes would go on to become the leaders in the battles that the Greeks and the Romans would fight against their opponents.

That's right. The Olympics were the preparations for war.

But, why then does so much of the New Testament, which does not seem to be about war, use the language of the Olympics to talk about Christian life?

Think of what Paul says:

To the Philippians he writes: ¹³ Brethren, I do not consider that I have [yet won the race]; but one thing I do, forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, ¹⁴ I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. (Phi 3:13-14 RSV)

Or listen to what he says to the Corinthians: Do you not know that in a race all the runners compete, but only one receives the prize? So run that you may obtain it. (1Co 9:24 RSV). For my part, he says, "I pommel my body and subdue it, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified." (1Co 9:27 RSV)

Or consider how the writer of the letter to the Hebrews, in a passage that we're going to read next week, spurs his readers on to Christian excellence: In your struggle against sin you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood. (Heb 12:4 NRS)

This is the language of the ancient Olympics. This is not the kind of language we use today to talk about our "Christian walk" Paul and the letter to the Hebrews were talking about the Christian sprint, the Christian boxing ring, the Christian pancratium. Spiritual mixed martial arts.

Why?

Because the people to whom Paul, and the author to the Hebrews, and also Peter, and James, and the other writers were writing to people for whom the ancient Olympic games were very familiar and because the language of those games was useful in saying that Christians, too, are preparing for warfare, though of a spiritual kind. The authors of the New Testament wanted to help prepare Christian athletes for the war that would inevitably come and they wanted to do so before the enemy had actually appeared, while there was still time to prepare.

But, they weren't just writing to the Christian athletes who might be obvious winners. They were writing to all Christians. They weren't just writing to the leaders of the Christian community, as those who were to be prepared to fight. They were writing to ALL Christians, young and old, male and female, slave and free... Don't look, they said, just to your elders to fight this battle for you. You must all be prepared. Paul says to his congregations: Be imitators of me! All of you.

OK, then. What does that spiritual warfare look like? How can we all be prepared for it as spiritually fit Olympic athletes when it comes? What is our preparation to be.

Well, I'm sure you know what Paul says about this. He writes to the Christians in Ephesus, not just to the leaders: 'Your fight will be against the Devil and all of his powers. It will not be against soldiers, or men and women, flesh and blood. Unlike the Greeks and Romans who were in the Olympic rings, preparing for battles with other Greeks, or other nations, Paul and the other Biblical writers say: There's no value in that. You will be standing against spiritual evil, however it manifests itself, since it is the work of the Devil and his legions of powers. Evil seeks to undo the life-giving work of God, to convince people of lies rather than truth, to have people embrace ugliness rather than what God has made beautiful. That's the war that is coming. Are you prepared to fight that war, and to win it? It won't matter how you fought it if you lose it.

Paul was very clear when he wrote about what Christians would have to do to win.

Instead of carrying heavy human weapons, they would have to carry and fight with the even heavier burden of always speaking and living the truth. Paul knew that if Christians did not, their message would have no credibility.

Instead of carrying heavy armor, Christians would need to be prepared to go into battle confident that they were clothed in Christ's righteousness, cleansed by the blood of the Lamb. If they sought to go into battle with hidden sins, they would lose. So, Paul says, don't hide your sins: be honest about them; confess them; and be cleansed of them.

Instead of being ready to run into battle with shoes that would protect them, Paul wrote that they were to be prepared to go into the spiritual battle shod in peace, ready to run wherever the need for peace would take them. Are we prepared for the battle that will take us as peacemakers into work, or home, or church... or Syria or Nigeria or Egypt?

Instead of carrying a heavy sword for killing, Paul wrote that when the war with evil came, Christians were to be ready at any moment to wield the words that God has spoken, words that give life. Christians were to be ready to go forth in a world in which there are so many words spoken in vain, today especially on afternoon talk-shows. Paul would say to us today: forget them. You -- man or woman, old or young -- are to have at your ready the Word of God made known to you by the Spirit of God. That's the only weapon that you will have, Paul says, when the fight begins.

And how will you protect yourself from the weapons that the evil one uses against you, all those lies, and slanders, and -- what is it that they call now on the Internet "trolling", which are provocative attempts to get you to act or speak when you shouldn't. What shield are you to use to protect yourself? Faith.

And that brings us to the 11th chapter of Hebrews, which is all about faith and about preparing for battle by learning from those who have gone before.

How are you to protect yourself in the battle? You are to keep your eyes fixed. Fixed on what? On the goal, on the target. But that goal is not the enemy. That goal is actually the one leading us forward.

What you hear throughout this long chapter is case after case of those who kept their eyes fixed. When the battle came, they did not waver. That was their sure defence. That's what faith is.

"Faith" is the ability to see what others cannot see AND to keep your eyes fixed on what others cannot see. When others tell you that there's nothing there, you know there is, and you know that that is your one hope of defence. It is your ability to see what matters in the fog of war, when everything becomes confused, that will save you.

I recently finished an historical masterpiece recounting the events of the 3 days of battle at Gettysburg, events that happened just 150 years ago this last July 1, 2 and 3. The book was an amazing reminder that in the heat of battle, the men who were fighting could see nothing. The dust and smoke were so thick, the bullets flying so fast, the trees being burst asunder by canon and volleys of musket shots. They couldn't even see the battle, much less see with their human eyes the goal of their fighting.

In peacetime running, it may be just fine for the long-distance runner to move smoothly along, running toward a visible target. But, in the midst of war, what do you keep your eyes fixed on? What you can see? Are you prepared for that?

And spiritual war is no different. There will come a time in the lives of those who are in the midst of spiritual warfare where you will not be able to see anything. This may be because the evil one has blinded you to what is true. This may be just because there is so much happening in your life. You must keep your eyes fixed.

But, fixed on what?

Not on the enemy, but the one leading us forward.

The author of the letter to the Hebrews tells us in the first verses of the next chapter: “So then let’s also run the race that is laid out in front of us... Let’s throw off any extra baggage, get rid of the sin that trips us up, and fix our eyes on Jesus, faith’s pioneer and perfecter. He endured the cross, ignoring the shame, for the sake of the joy that was laid out in front of him, and sat down at the right side of God’s throne.” (Heb 12:1-2 CEB)

You say: But I can’t fix my eyes on Jesus. I can’t see him? I can’t see our captain who goes before us. How can I keep my eyes fixed on him?

The writer is not talking about your human eyes. The eyes of faith. Eyes that enabled Abel and Enoch, and Abraham, and Moses and all the others to see him before he ever appeared to us on earth.

How? By His Word.

In the midst of the battle of Gettysburg, men could not see but they could hear. They could hear the trumpet. They could hear the blood-curdling cry of the southern rebels, for which they became so infamous. It was difficult, but they were prepared to listen for it.

Can you hear the Word of God? Are you prepared to hear it and respond when the battle comes?

God is calling us -- all of us, male and female, young and old, weak and strong -- to Olympic preparation for spiritual warfare by giving us all sorts of Olympic challenges to hear and discern God’s Word now so that we are prepared for battle when it comes. Learn from those saints who have gone before how they did it. You have God’s Word to teach you how they did it.

My friends, the question before us this morning is: are we fully engaged now, next this Winter, not 2 years from now, are we fully engaged now in spiritual Olympics that will prepare us for the spiritual warfare that we know is the Church’s fate in this world? Are you even now engaged in training, in your own spiritual Olympics? If you are, then you are engaged in excelling at listening for, and discerning, and keeping the Word of God fixed before you... hourly, daily, weekly, monthly, and yearly. Not the word of man or of woman, but of God.

That is your Olympic training. You will not be asked at the finish line the modern Olympic question how well or how poorly you fought but whether you won or not. The crown is given to

the winner, and we all are given in Christ the authority to run the race and win. To lose is to let evil triumph in the world.

When men and women of faith keep their eyes fixed on the one who has gone before us, now out of our human sight, but who has made himself perfectly known to us in the person of Jesus Christ, whose Word has been spoken, heard, recorded, and is there for us to feast on.... this war has a clear end, and it is the victory of the Lamb.

And what's in it for us, who have faith? What is the crown that we will receive at the finish line? That's the topic for next week, Lord willing.

Notes

M. Poliakoff, "Ancient Combat Sports," *The Olympic Games: How They All Began* (Biblical Archaeological Society, 2008) 13–24.