

The Games of August

by Jonathan Aitken

THE GOLD MEDALISTS and the cheering crowds have departed from Olympic London, but the 2012 games were such an outstanding success that the focus has shifted to their legacy. The politically correct consensus says that the L-word should be applied to tangible projects such as expanding sports coaching in schools; building more velodromes and rowing lakes; or raising extra funds for training athletes to win more medals at the 2016 games in Rio de Janeiro.

These are worthy objectives but too narrow. Thinking out of the box toward the world that is not seen, there are deeper questions to be asked: Is there a spiritual legacy from the Olympics? What can the church learn from the games? Are there connections to be made between sporting inspiration and religious inspiration?

The athletic world and the spiritual world have never been far apart. The movie *Chariots of Fire* is a contemporary reminder of the link. Twenty centuries earlier, the New Testament frequently compared athletic contests to growth in the life of Christ. Try these words from St. Paul:

Run in such a way as to get the prize. Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last but we do it to get a crown that will last for ever. (Corinthians 9:24)

Writing in a culture that prized both spiritual virtue and physical athleticism, St. Paul used training as an image for Christian development. The Greek word he used in this context for “to train” is *gymnazo*, from which comes *gymnasium*. So this metaphor used by the earliest Christian writers may have a message for our modern world: Train for virtue.

Augustine of Hippo defined a virtue as a good habit consonant with our nature. In sport and the spiritual

life, good habits are acquired by repetition and by discipline. A disciple must be a disciplined person.

The strongest Olympic athletes, like the strongest Christians, commit themselves to a set of rules that point to life at its best. They cooperate in a community, often with loving values that are unselfish and supportive of their neighbors. Two examples of this were striking among the 2012 gold medalists.

The British superhero of the games was Mo Farah, who won both the 10,000 and 5,000 meter races. After he crossed the line to take gold in the 10,000 meters, his actions spoke volumes. First he embraced Galen Rupp of the USA, his training partner, who came a close second. Then Farah went down on his knees to do *sujud*, the Muslim genuflection which is accompanied by the prayer “Glory to God, the Most High.” Then he kissed his wife and daughter. Only afterward did he acknowledge the cheering of the crowd. He had made it clear that his priorities were his God, his family, and his fellow athlete.

Some of the same symbolism was shown by the “fastest man on earth,” Usain Bolt. Before he bent himself into the starting blocks for the 100 meters, 200 meters, and relay (he won gold medals in all three) he made the sign of the Cross. After his victories he was kindly solicitous toward the two other Jamaican runners, who came second and third to him in the big races. The bonds between these fiercely competitive athletes had evidently been welded together in their island community and in life at their shared training camp. Their closeness suggested that they were mindful of the commandment to “love thy neighbor.”

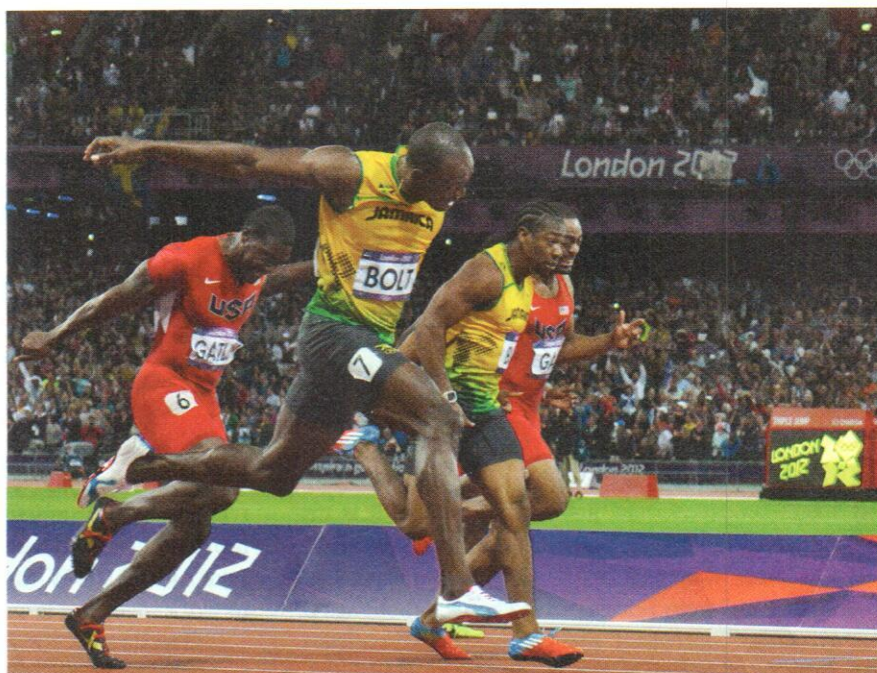
One of the common themes running through the life stories of Olympic athletes is that they are transformed by their dedication to sporting excellence. At one level, this transformation is simply a matter of raising talented athletes into the league of medalists and champions. But at another level, the transforma-

tion can penetrate to an individual's character and soul. One gold medal-winning British boxer was able to take part in the games only because two years earlier a judge had given him a second chance and spared him from a jail sentence. His sport had turned his life around.

The Church is in the transformation business, too, but the language it uses to describe this process is often banal in comparison with the language of Olympic sport. The verbs are significant here. Christians speak of "attending" church. The problem is that "attending" is a static, passive activity. If you "attend" something, you just go to be there, not to be active or to participate, or to do something that is exciting in its commitment. We "attend" meetings, interviews, lectures, court hearings, and services. No athlete would speak of "attending" the Olympics. They go to run, to win, to rejoice in victory, and they train intensively to prepare. By contrast, the Church has an image of being static. It is somewhere you go to sit, stand, sing, listen, and that's about it. Somewhere along the line our spiritual leaders seem to have forgotten what St. Paul did not forget in his Epistles: Spiritual life is a demanding race with a prize of everlasting joy.

THE TRANSCENDING SPIRIT of the 2012 games was joy. We British have a reputation for being rather inhibited, standoffish, self-deprecating, and dour. We take pride in our stiff upper lips. Hardly ever do we as a nation really let ourselves go with pure unadulterated joy. But that is what happened at the Olympics.

Of course, it helped that we won many more medals than expected and came third in the league table behind the U.S. and China. But what we most enjoyed was being a successful host nation. Hospitality—another important spiritual discipline—is a mega-professional undertaking at the Olympics, involving venues, transport, logistics, administration, and above all 80,000 cheerful volunteers who worked amazingly hard to keep



the show on the road. They were the face of a nation of good neighbors.

At one point in the games, I went to the International Olympic Committee headquarters hotel, the Park Lane Hilton, to have breakfast with Henry Kissinger. He, although not naturally built for an Olympic role, is a high-ranking honorary official of the IOC to whom the other committee members come to pay homage. It was only there, at his breakfast table, when I heard these great pandrums from all corners of the world showering compliments on the excellence of the London Games, that I grasped quite how successfully they had been run.

The Church can learn so much from the Olympics. God gave the athletes their bodies and the IOC organizers their talents; but what made it all work was the training, the commitment, the disciplined spirit, and the goal of joy. Spiritual victories are eternal and far outweigh temporal athletic successes. But both must be worked for on earth. So let one learn from the other, starting with the legacy of these amazing London Games. ✨

Jonathan Aitken is *The American Spectator's* *High Spirits* columnist and the author of *John Newton: From Disgrace to Amazing Grace* (Crossway), *Charles W. Colson: A Life Redeemed* (Doubleday), and *Nixon: A Life* (available in paperback from Regnery Books).