

## The Catholic Athlete #8: You are so weak!

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This series of short reflections addresses athletes who profess the Christian faith, in an attempt to bring together sports and Christianity. I write as a Catholic, hence the title of the series. I trust, however, that athletes from other denominations may also find spiritual profit in these texts.

It breaks my heart to watch an athlete fall during a race or get injured in one of the events in the Olympic Games. But even worse is watching them give up. I get it: if you are running the 800 meters and you trip and fall, there is no way that you will be able to make up the time you lost by running harder. Or is there? Eric Liddell is reported to have done just that, in the 400 meters in Stoke on Trent, July 1923, where he won first place after falling in the race's first bend. Another exception is Sifan Hassan who, during a qualifying heat in the 1500m in Tokyo 2020, fell with 400 meters to go, got up, and finished first! (Check it out: <https://www.nbcolympics.com/videos/sifan-hassan-roars-back-win-1500m-prelim-after-trip-fall>). Anyway, I understand why most athletes choose to give up, but it would be so much better for them if they got up again and ran swift for the finish line. Not doing so shows just how weak they are.

Yes, athletes are incredibly weak. Have you ever thought of yourself as *vulnerable*? Believe it or not, athletes may be considered a vulnerable group when it comes to ethics considerations for research with humans, together with children, prisoners, elderly and mentally disabled; individuals in these groups are often unable to give their voluntary consent to participate in studies. In the case of athletes, they may be considered “unable to consent” because peer pressure from teammates or coaches may be particularly high, or because the desire to win at all costs may push some of them to make the wrong decisions.

As an athlete, and precisely because of some of the qualities which make a good athlete, you are particularly vulnerable to become addicted: addicted to victory, to strength, to your own beauty and prowess, the *lower goods* that Bishop Robert Barron referred to during a conversation with Sal Di Stefano, from the popular podcast *Mind Pump Media*:

“You will inevitably become addicted when you get stuck at one of those low levels, for just that reason: you obtain the physique you always wanted, it’s like ‘this is the top prize that I was going for’. Well then, the next day you are going to say, ‘OK, but now I have to make it better, and I’ve got to try harder, and I have to keep going after it’ (...) Because the heart is actually ordered to God, not to these lower things, I’ll get stuck in an addictive pattern, because I’ll say ‘it’s not enough, I am not happy, I don’t have what I want, I just need more and more



and more of this lower good'. And the answer is: no, you don't need more of that. Rather, take that lower good (...) and now give that to God so you say 'I'm doing this *ad maiorem Dei gloriam*', as Ignatius said, 'to the greater glory of God'. Now your (... achievement...) will take on real meaning! (Barron, R., 2021).

OK, OK, I agree: if you never attempted anything great, you would be much safer, but you don't want to be safe, you want to WIN. Yet, your desire to please God should be much greater than your desire to win. Go ahead, win, but do it right: for the greater glory of God. You will be stronger—and safer—in the process.

Let's look at your weakness from another angle, one that reminds us of the reflection on idolatry:

“The blacksmith takes a tool and works with it in the coals; he shapes an idol with hammers, he forges it with the might of his arm. He gets hungry and loses his strength; he drinks no water and grows faint. The carpenter measures with a line and makes an outline with a marker; he roughs it out with chisels and marks it with compasses. He shapes it in human form, human form in all its glory, that it may dwell in a shrine (...) he bows down to it and worships. He prays to it and says, ‘Save me! You are my god!’” (Isaiah 44:12-13, 17b).

Let us observe the athlete carefully: you train, practice, make your best effort and perfect yourself. You strengthen your muscles, improve your technique, and focus all your effort on your sport. Yes, you get hungry and thirsty and grow faint; you know you have to eat and drink regularly. And when you succeed, you may watch or read the news and think: “I am the best! This victory is all mine!” But your body is more fragile and demands more attention and care than any normal person's. Do you want to put your trust in something vain that passes away? (Aragón-Vargas, 1991).

Humans have an interesting obsession with high performance, beauty, and perfection; I guess it comes from being created in the image of God. How interesting, however, that the closer humans get to perfection, the more fragile they become! A simple muscle tear or the common cold can throw months of training in the trash... Maybe, because of sin, men and women are condemned to chaos and imperfection, and everything they do ends up being useless efforts to escape their reality. Only in Christ, at the end of times, will humans achieve true perfection, and there will never again be any injuries, or sickness, or aging, and personal records will always improve, and it won't matter anyway, because we will be eternally in the presence of God (cf. Revelation 21:3-4).

Yes, in spite of their weakness, athletes are in a privileged position, if only they would pay attention to the words of Papa Montini to the cyclists competing in the 1964 *Giro D'Italia*:



“Sport, besides being a reality that can be sensed and experienced, is a symbol of a spiritual reality, consisting of a hidden but essential plot of our lives: life is an effort, life is a competition, life is a risk, life is a race, life is a hope in a finish line, transcending the scene of common experience perceived by the soul and presented by religion (...) Be worthy not only of representing, but of conquering that final goal which is the true and last destiny of life.” (Pope Paul VI, 1964).

### References:

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