

GNITN

#1,002

The Only Race Worth Winning

Training Is Key

When I was in High School I toyed with going out for sports. I was going into my junior year and I figured track was a good place to start because I was told I was a fast runner. And I was compared to most of my friends so sprints was where I told the coach I wanted to try out. He said long distance was where I was best suited, but I refused because I hated to run that long. I wanted to go out, run quickly for seconds and sit down. Unfortunately, I discovered that when I went up against the best of the best in my high school I was woefully inadequate in any phase of running. They needed a pole vaulter, I took one look at that pole and the bar, and I decided keeping my feet on good ole terra firma was much safer. Needless to say, my little excursion into high school sports was less than a success. It is true that I did win one race, but it was only because there was one heat of the 220 and it needed one more runner. I was just a place holder. No, my little bout with delusions of grandeur ended rather ignobly. I could have done much better if I took my coach's advice and ran long distance, but that would have meant training and practice over an extended period of time, neither of which I was willing to do. I lacked the focus to become an athlete in track and field. And of course raw talent, but I digress.

Real Dedication

In an [article](#) from *Men's Health* I found just a little about an Olympic athlete. Ivan Puskovitch, who wanted to win that elusive gold medal in the 2024 Olympic games in Paris:

I'm currently living in a hostel and living out of two suitcases. Food is one of the hardest parts; I'm going to the grocery store almost every day since it's a shared living situation and I don't want to take up too much space.

But it's the closest I've ever lived to the pool. I get up at 5 a.m. and skateboard to practice—it runs from 5:30 to 7:30 a.m., and then I have practice again in the evening from 5 to 7:30. I do 11 to 12 sessions per week, and swim as much as 100 kilometers a week during my heaviest training blocks.

I take an hour and a half to three-hour nap every day in between practices, since sleep is so paramount for my recovery. If there's only one thing I could do to recover for the rest of my life, it would be sleep. It's a superpower. If it wasn't something our bodies did naturally, it would be the most banned substance on the planet. At night, I'm in bed sometime between 9 and 10 p.m. It's pretty much practice, eat, sleep, repeat.

He had a coach which he moved from West Virginia University to Santa Monica, California to train with specifically after his college coach resigned abruptly. As you can tell, being able to roll with the punches is something all athletes do. There are no perfect environments.

Controlling What You Can

Puskovitch notes that there were difficulties to overcome in his journey to Paris:

There have been a lot of hurdles—moments when it doesn't feel that things could get any worse. The Monday after I moved from West Virginia to California, my skateboard hit a bump and my phone flew out of my pocket into a puddle, cracked, and got a ton of water in it. But there was

nothing I could do about it—it's just life that happens. You learn to control the controllables in any sport, and especially in open-water swimming, because you can't control the waves, the wind, the weather, or the water temperature. You also can't control what everyone else is doing during the race. If I'm next to someone who's extremely physical and hitting everyone, I can't control making them chill out, but I can control repositioning myself and pivoting in that moment. And that's a much better way to expend your energy.

This Olympic athlete fully understands that some things you simply can't control and that actually helps him focus and train:

The more accepting you become of the factors that you just cannot change, the better you're going to be able to apply yourself to the parts you do have some control over. It feels like all of this is going to make a great story one day, and I'll be able to look back and say, "You dropped your whole life in one state and moved across the country at a moment's notice to pursue your dreams." It's almost poetic in a sense. I know I wouldn't have it any other way.

Ivan [finished](#) 19th, the highest American finish in the competition.

A More Important Race

Therefore we also, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, 2 looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. ([Heb 12:1-2, NKJV](#))

The Apostle Paul used a lot of illustrations using sports. He was well aware of the Greek culture and their games in Olympia and other places so when he wanted to make a point he'd gravitate there. The most common one is about being a runner which is seen in [1 Corinthians 9:24](#), [2 Timothy 4:7](#); [Philippians 3:13-14](#); [Galatians 5:7](#); and the aforementioned [Hebrews 12:1-2](#).

In an [article](#) from J. Michael Lester we read more about two references to see if we can glean any life lessons from them. The first is from [1 Corinthians 9-24-27](#):

Do you not know that those who run in a race all run, but one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may obtain it. 25 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. 26 Therefore I run thus: not with uncertainty. Thus I fight: not as one who beats the air. 27 But I discipline my body and bring it into subjection, lest, when I have preached to others, I myself should become disqualified. (NKJV)

The author then explores these verses and makes good points as they apply to Christians:

In the first passage, the historical backdrop provides tremendous insight and cultural context.

- 1. Only one runner receives the prize. The Hellenic Games knew nothing of team sports. The Christian runner cannot "coast" to victory or be the weak link on a strong team.*
- 2. There is an agony (from the underlying Greek word), a striving, for the athlete if he is to have the mastery. The "pain" both then and now is worth the "gain."*
- 3. The key to victory is discipline and self-control.*
- 4. If the Corinthian athletes would subject themselves to so much intense training for a corruptible crown (a wreath that wilts), how much should the Corinthian Christians be willing to subject themselves for an incorruptible crown?*
- 5. A runner does not run aimlessly; his race, or course, is a matter of purpose.*

6. *An Olympic boxer does not fight the shadows; his punches have a purpose.*
7. *Paul uses a phrase that implies giving oneself a black eye and making himself a slave for the express purpose of not disqualifying himself from the games.*
8. *Paul, the announcer of the events, was also Paul the runner. The fear of being a castaway, a disqualified contestant, was a strong consideration in his life.*

Lester then sums up this passage this way:

The underlying theme from Paul's first letter to the Corinthians could be summed up:

"Discipline yourself by considering your purpose. Keep focused on the goal and run at it even though it is painful and uncomfortable. It will be worth it when you arrive at the desired prize."

This One Thing I Do

Lester turns his attention to these verses from **Phillipians 3:13-14**:

Brethren, I do not count myself to have apprehended; but one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind and reaching forward to those things which are ahead, 14 I press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. (NKJV)

He highlights three key points:

Similar to 1 Corinthians 9, the runner is going for the prize. There are three key phrases in these verses that form the basis for the athletic metaphor:

"...But this one thing I do..."

This phrase speaks of the athlete's purpose. He did not spend ten months of his life training to do varied tasks. His chance for glory was directly related to the intensity of his training for one event. Ten months of pain would be endured for a race that was 600 feet long (Gr. Stadia).

Lester then gives us a visual picture of the scene:

The stadium was an oblong area, with a straight wall across one end, where the entrances were, the other end being round and entirely closed. Tiers of seats were on either side for the spectators or witnesses. The starting place was at the entrance end and was marked by a square pillar. At the opposite end was the goal, where the judge sat and held the prize. The eyes of the competitors remained fixed on him...The goal, as well as the starting point, was marked by a square pillar, and a third was placed midway between the two.

As seen in **Hebrews 12** the runners removed any things that would slow them down or distract them and knew that there were those in the stands watching and even rooting them on:

The runner was surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses. He had taken off all necessary weights. Ten months of training was all for this moment. This one moment could potentially yield a corruptible crown. Paul presses the analogy to remind us that Christians are not "one moment wonders." He is to be in a continual race, always looking toward the goal – his "one thing to do."

A Strong Passion

Lester then points out three words that Paul uses that illustrate the athlete's desires to win:

"...Forgetting...Reaching...Pressing"

This phrase speaks of the athlete's passion. This phrase is at times removed from its context. At times, people may be reminded to "forget those things which are behind" as though Paul is dealing with past failures. However, contextually it is clear that he is dealing with past accomplishments. He is saying that past victories do not guarantee victory in today's race.

The word “reaching” points to the very end of the race where I and other runners were told to lean forward at the finish line after expending our last bit of strength:

The picture of reaching is that of stretching, straining, and the runner giving it that last kick against all of his instincts. This is what he has trained for; this is his moment. Discomfort and pain are not strong enough factors to cost him a crown. The runner will reach with all that is in him.

And then there is the pressing:

The runner also presses. The word picture here is that of hastening, pursuing, or striving for a purpose. Paul’s phrase forms an idiom, “literally ‘to pursue to a goal, to press toward a goal’ to strive energetically for some purpose—‘to strive toward a goal, to press on with the purpose of.’

Of course the last thing to note is why we run:

“...the mark for the prize...”

This phrase speaks of the athlete’s prize or pursuit. The mark, the scope of the target, for which this athlete is focused upon is the high calling. This high calling is literally the upward calling. In both the Greek, and later the Roman, games, the judge (and at certain seasons, the Emperor), would call the victorious athlete up to the Judge’s Seat and there in front of the crowd, the athlete would receive the victor’s laurels. The Judge had issued an “upward calling” for the participant. In like manner, the Christian is listening for his Judge, the Lord Jesus Christ, to sound out an upward, high calling to these victorious participants to receive the crown.

It is this last proclamation that we should long to hear:

To hear the Judge say, “Well done; you have finished your course; you have won,” – this is the longing for the Christian who strives to play within the rules; who desires to not be disqualified and castaway; who believes that any discomfort and pain in this life pales in comparison with the chance to win the victor’s crown from Christ.

Lester then fittingly sums up why Paul used sports analogies:

Two reoccurring themes appear when studying the Greek athlete: self-discipline and purpose. Both themes were readily apparent to Paul and his usage of the metaphor. If the child of God is going to receive from the Judge a victor’s crown, he must exercise temperance, self-discipline, and control. Further, he must understand the nature of his course. He cannot run aimlessly. He must passionately run with a purpose to win within the confines of the rules that has been set.

He ends by telling us these encouraging words:

We are citizens of a heavenly country – let us represent home well!

I know I will and I know so will, too.