

Now that football is over, my sports brain is switching over to hockey. The Steelers couldn't get into the Super Bowl. But maybe the Penguins can get another Stanley Cup.

I recently re-watched one of my 3 favorite hockey movies; the 2004 movie, *Miracle*, about the 1980 US Olympic Hockey team.

Early in the movie, Coach Herb Brooks, played by Kurt Russell, is trying to build a team from a bunch of disparate collegiate hockey players. And he does it with intense physical training. He says, "I can't promise you we'll be the best team at Lake Placid next February. But we will be the best conditioned. That I can promise you."

And amazingly, the underdog team succeeds in being not only being the best conditioned, but being the best, beating the seemingly unbeatable Soviets at their own game.

But before they took the gold medals at Lake Placid, they had to work hard to prepare. And their hard work paid off with Olympic victory.

Of course, the Olympics are coming again this summer. I usually enjoy the Winter Olympics far more than the summer games. But there's still much to enjoy in the summer. And as I watch the weight lifters hoisting huge pieces of iron over their heads, or the gymnasts flipping and twirling through the air, I often wonder, "Are they really human? Are they really the same species as me? Because their feats seem so incredible."

Yet the reason these athletes seem so amazing is because of their conditioning. Yes, talent is undoubtedly a part. But behind all of these events are athletes who have spent many years in training to prepare for these games. It's difficult for most of us to even begin to comprehend the dedication it takes to be such an athlete. They have to organize their daily lives around exercise and practice. What they eat and how they sleep will play a part in whether they will be able to win the gold medal.

In our Epistle lesson, Paul uses athletic imagery to describe aspects of the Christian life. 1Corinthians ch9 (bulletins). The city of Corinth was no stranger to athletic competition. Every 2 years, Corinth would host the great Isthmian games. In Paul's day, the Isthmian games were second only to the ancient Olympics in status in the Greco-Roman world.

And so Paul finds it very easy to use athletic imagery, specifically running, then boxing, in describing the Christian life.

He says, v24 "Do you not know that in a race the runners all compete, but only one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may win it."

It's basic, Paul is saying. Athletes who compete, compete to win. Think of someone like Lance Armstrong.

Some of you may not know this, but I've got a close family connection to Lance Armstrong. My brother's stepson's ex-girlfriend was Lance Armstrong's children's nanny. I

want to hear everyone say, "Ooh." Now that "inside" connection didn't give me any huge degree of special insights into Lance. But I do know this. Each year when Lance would go to France, he didn't go just to ride. He wouldn't say, "Well I've won the Tour before. It's no big deal what I do this time." No, Lance would go to win, and a record seven times he did.

In a race, Paul says, everyone runs to win, though only one person actually wins.

So, in the Christian life, run to win. But, unlike a race, it's not a competition. God's grace is available to all who seek it. So, Paul is saying, get serious about seeking it.

v25 "Athletes exercise self-control in all things." Athletes will reorder their lives in order to be competitive. They'll change what they eat and what they drink and how they spend their time in order to be competitive.

Not only that, what do they get? Sure these days, the pro's get big bucks. But Olympians only get a gold medal and glory. And in Paul's day, they would receive far less. Yes they would seek glory and adulation. But the only concrete prize an ancient athlete would receive was a wreath.

If you won the Olympics, you would get a wreath made of olive leaves. If you won the Isthmian games in later years, you would receive a wreath of pine needles. But if you won the Isthmian games in the early years, you would receive a wreath of celery.

Years of training. Blood sweat and tears. And for what? A gold medal? A Super Bowl ring? A trip to Disneyworld? No. For a crown made out of celery.

v25 "Athletes exercise self-control in all things; they do it to receive a perishable wreath, but," and this is an important but, "but we an imperishable one."

Paul is saying, athletes spend years of training in order to take home a bunch of celery that will be rotten mush in a week. But our prize, our gift from God, is an imperishable crown. It is the crown of eternal life. It is the gift of God given through Jesus Christ. It is the greatest gift any human could receive.

And so, the unspoken question is, in the light of such a tremendous gift, how serious are you? You've got the greatest prize awaiting you. So does that change your life? Do you spend any effort reorganizing your time around God?

We humans spend enormous amounts of time with our hobbies, with sports, with our careers, with our friends, with countless diversions and entertainments. So how much of your time and energy do you want to devote to God? That's Paul's question that hangs there.

He answers for himself, v26 "So I do not run aimlessly, nor do I box as though beating the air, 27 but I punish my body and enslave it, so that after proclaiming to others I myself should not be disqualified."

This is too serious, he's saying. God is too important. So I don't want to live my life running around aimlessly. I don't want to be throwing wild punches that just swish in the air.

I want to have purpose. I want to connect. Because I know that the things that I spend my time on in my life become most important to me. I know that my love for God can grow cold. I know that I can walk away from that relationship and turn my back on God.

So, Paul is saying, I don't run aimlessly. I don't want to run into the ground or run into a wall. I want to cross the finish line and see God face to face. So, in the meantime, I want to live the Christian life with discipline. Running in the right direction. Making my punches connect.

Our society seems to be running at a breakneck pace. But are we getting anywhere? We run around all day long? But are we running aimlessly?

Paul would suggest that we need to run with purpose. We need to run with the purpose of aiming for the imperishable crown, claiming our identity as children of God and joint heirs with Jesus Christ. And we need to engage in spiritual training.

It all comes down to discipline. A boxer spends 10 hours in training for every minute spent fighting. A cyclist logs 20,000 miles in training in order to ride 2,000 miles in the Tour de France.

If we're in the Christian life for the long haul, then the important concept for us is spiritual discipline. What does spiritual discipline look like? It looks like spending time reading the Bible. It looks like intentional time spent in prayer. It looks like engaging in regular worship. It looks like intentionally going out of your way to love someone who is hard to love. It looks like intentionally seeking to help someone who needs your help.

The bottom line is this:
Run away from self-indulgence.
Run toward the things of God.

God's grace awaits all who seek it.
So get serious about seeking it.

Life is short--pray hard.
Just do it.