

Athletes Plan to Share Gospel During Olympics

Christian athletes at the Beijing Olympic Games plan to share Christ behind the scenes in communist China.



[] Christian athletes are prepared to share their faith during this summer's Olympic Games—which begin tomorrow in Beijing and continue through August 24—despite the fact that the Chinese government's official stance is religious evangelism of any kind will not be tolerated.

Ever since the International Olympic Committee awarded the city of Beijing the 2008 Olympic Games, many Christian Olympians have been viewing the impending event with both concern and excitement.

Adding to the unusual mix of faith, sportsmanship and politics at this year's Games, controversy was recently sparked when Franklin Graham, son of evangelist Billy Graham, told reporters in China that Christians should not evangelize during the Olympics because it is against the laws of the country.

Graham made the statement in China while preaching legally in government-sanctioned churches and while meeting with government officials.

But Bob Fu, president of China Aid Association, took issue with Graham's comments, calling them "offensive and inappropriate." Fu said when an unjust law demands that Christians go against their faith and Jesus' teaching of the Great Commission, "they cannot and will not concede to a 'faith moratorium.'"

Christian athletes heading to Beijing agree with Fu. They say their visit to the city is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity not only to compete, but also to have a lasting impact for the

gospel.

"We have an incredible platform just because of the Olympics and it's going to be so neat to see what God has in store for the nation of China," said Cat Whitehill, a veteran defender on the U.S. Women's Soccer Team. "But what's cool is that the Chinese culture is really accepting of God because they want something different. They want someone to love them despite what's going on. They're very receptive."

According to retired freestyle swimmer Josh Davis, who competed at the 1996 Olympics in Atlanta and the 2000 Olympics in Sydney, collecting three gold medals and two silver medals, the majority of evangelistic efforts takes place outside of the Olympic Village and is geared toward the host country and the international fan base.

"That's 99 percent of what happens," Davis said. "Ministry groups from North America and all over the world converge upon the Olympic city with hundreds of tracts and resources in hand."

The opportunities for ministering among athletes occur most naturally when the competitors are spending one-on-one time in their dorm rooms, at the lunch hall, while sightseeing or even at the venues of competition. Davis said most of the ministry happens on a relational level between athletes and not so much when an outsider is ministering. "Athletes are funny that way," he added.

At the Goodwill Games in 1999, for instance, Davis had the opportunity to cheer for fellow Christian athlete Laura Wilkinson at her platform diving event.

"I could tell she had a look on her face like she wasn't 100 percent," Davis remembers. "I said, 'Laura, can I pray for you?' And that was a real turning point for her in the competition. So it was a moment like that. It was more relational and one-on-one. That's where you see more progress or fruit with athletes."

American marathon record-holder Ryan Hall concurs and is equally energized by the thought of playing some sort of role—big or small—in a seed-planting effort that might have evangelistic ramifications for years to come.

“It seems like God is really at work there,” Hall says. “I know that He’s got something planned for China. I don’t know what exactly it is but I’m excited to be able to contribute what I can. God’s always at work. I believe that He’s definitely going to do some neat things at the Olympics. It’s something to look forward to, something to be excited about.”

Retired wheelchair marathon record-holder Jean Driscoll has won multiple medals at both the Olympic Games and Paralympic Games and has been disappointed at the protests in Europe and America against China—mostly due to the government’s treatment of Tibet.

“I think this is a tremendous opportunity for the Western world to have influence on China’s leaders and their people,” Driscoll said. “We lead by example. That’s exactly what Christ has called us to do. You can’t help but be touched and influenced by the world coming into your home and being an example.” —**Chad Bonham**

To read more about Christian athletes at the Beijing Olympics and their evangelistic efforts, check out the August issue of Charisma on newsstands now.