

# Faith in the Games

These Olympic athletes are boldly proclaiming Jesus in London

## **Dawn Harper – Track and Field (Hurdles)**

When Dawn Harper shocked the world with her gold medal performance at the 2008 Beijing Olympics, questions about race favorite Lolo Jones (who knocked down a hurdle and opened the door for Harper's victory) and a reporter's suggestion that she lacked credibility made Harper realize no one had given her a chance of winning.

Growing up in a rough East St. Louis, Ill., neighborhood, Harper knows something about overcoming the odds. But her natural leaping ability and speed put her on the proverbial fast track to follow in the footsteps of another hometown hero: Jackie Joyner-Kersey.

Ironically, Harper's defining moment as a young athlete was also a turning point in her relationship with God. After injuring her knee as a high-school sophomore, her doctor said she was unlikely to run as fast after she fully recovered. With God's help, she not only got back to full speed, but ultimately pulled off one of the biggest upsets in recent track history.

"From this big ol' globe, God chose this little girl from East St. Louis out of all the kids who have said, 'I want to go to the Olympics,'" Harper says. "He knew that I could handle this—the knee surgery and all of the things that come with being an Olympic champion. He took the girl that no one thought would win. He chose me. He entrusted me with this."

## **Kevin Durant – Basketball**



There are plenty of temptations lurking around the average

professional athlete, but perhaps none sneakier and as potentially devastating as pride. Kevin Durant knows this to be true. Arguably one of the top five players in the NBA, the Oklahoma City Thunder forward says it's a daily struggle to remain humble in an ego-building environment like professional sports.

In London, Durant will get his first shot at Olympic glory since his initial baptism into major international competition at the 2010 World Championships. There, he led the U.S. squad in scoring with 22.8 points per game and a team record 205 total points and 38 single-game points.

He makes sure to keep the words of Jesus at the forefront of his mind: "For whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted" (Matt. 23:12, NIV).

"I always kind of pinch myself and say that any day this can be gone. When people tell me I'm great, I [remind myself that I] can always be better. I always work on what I have now. I've got to be thankful to the Lord for the gifts He's given me. My gift back to Him is to always be humble and to always try to work as hard as I can."

#### **Brady Ellison – Archery**

Brady Ellison asked Jesus into his heart when he was a young child. But it wasn't until God saved him from dying in a horrific car accident that the native Arizonian took his faith seriously. Now the avid hunter-turned-Olympic-archer prays that God will use him and other Christian athletes as "vessels for His glory."

Ellison has been just that as one of the most prolific Americans to pick up a bow and arrow. He has won gold medals at three Pan American Games (including team and individual honors last year) and three gold medals at the World Indoor Archery Championships (including top marks in this year's

individual competition). Ellison was also ranked No. 1 at the end of the 2010 and 2011 seasons.

He says Philippians 4:13—"I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me" (NKJV)—has been instrumental throughout his career. "Once I put winning in God's hands, I stopped worrying about it. Since then, I've gone to these tournaments and I've shot with no fear, doing only the best I can do and leaving the rest up to God."

### **Kendrick Farris – Weightlifting**



When Kendrick Farris was 14 years old, he had aspirations of eventually becoming an Olympic weightlifter. Having no idea how hard it was to qualify, and thinking athletes made the team simply by representing a weight class, he experienced a harsh reality when he fell short. Instead of competing in Athens in 2004, Farris found himself bussing tables at a restaurant while going to college full time. While at work one day, the Olympic weightlifting competition was on TV when a co-worker pointed up and asked Farris, "Isn't this what you do?"

"It was like God was showing me where I was supposed to be, and it wasn't bussing tables," the Louisiana native says. "So I said: 'Yeah, that's what I do. I'm going to be on the next Olympic Team.' That's when I knew I was supposed to be an Olympian."

Farris worked hard and qualified for the 2008 Olympics, where he placed eighth in the 85-kg weight class. Two years later, he won gold at the 2010 Pan American Games. It was during that time frame when Farris' faith became real to him and helped guide him down his destined path.

"In 2008 I was living the lifestyle when it was convenient for me, but by the end of the year I had rededicated my life to Christ and I haven't looked back," he says. "I've truly

humbled myself over the past couple of years and I've learned about the power we have as Christians. Jesus said we would do greater works and I believe that."

### ✘ **Brittany Viola – Diving (Platform)**

Brittany Viola was an 8-year-old gymnast when she was captivated by the American women's gymnastics team known as the "Magnificent Seven" during the 1996 Summer Games in Atlanta. She had no idea her own pursuit of the sport would ultimately take her to the Olympics 10-meter diving platform.

"In a sense, diving found me," Viola recalls. "In eighth grade, I was enjoying a free day at the pool and decided to play around on the diving boards. Doing a few of my old gymnastics tricks into the water to my feet, I caught the attention of the high school swimming coach. Not knowing that diving was a sport, I talked to my parents and experienced my first diving session a couple of days later."

Viola narrowly missed qualifying for the 2004 Olympic team and struggled in her bid four years ago but has since become a steady force within the U.S. diving program. She won her first national championship in 2011.

As the daughter of former Minnesota Twins pitcher and World Series MVP Frank Viola, the Orlando, Fla., native has learned much about athletic excellence. But it was a serious battle with bulimia six years ago that deepened her relationship with God.

"As I struggled with my eating disorder, I would be reminded that God still loved me even when I did not love myself," Viola notes. "His forgiveness helped me to forgive myself. His truth allowed me to replace the many lies in my head. He saw me as fearfully and wonderfully made—His perfect creation, chosen, holy and dearly loved."

### **Tobin Heath – Soccer**



When the U.S. women's soccer team won the gold medal in Beijing four years ago, youngest team member Tobin Heath was surprised at how moved she was by seeing her country's flag raised and hearing the national anthem played. Her usually mellow personality gave way to a wave of unexpected emotion. Now older, more experienced and spiritually stronger, Heath is anxious for the chance to help the Americans defend that top spot on the podium. But there's a greater goal that drives her quest for athletic greatness.

"It's not about that worldly outcome in terms of winning or losing," she explains. "It's about Jesus being known—not in a way that forces it upon other people, but in a way that lets people know how He's transformed my life and how He's given me purpose and meaning and love and satisfaction."

#### **✘ Bryan Clay – Track & Field (Decathlon)**

Bryan Clay is quick to admit that he didn't know he could be an Olympian until the first time he actually qualified for the 2004 American track and field squad in the decathlon: "For me it wasn't much different than a kid saying, 'I want to be in the NFL.' It was just a dream."

Not only did Clay's dream come true, he scored the second-highest number of points (8,820) ever by an American and won the silver medal. That's when he realized he just might be one of the best decathletes in the world. At the 2008 Beijing Games, Clay bested his effort and joined a notable list of American gold medalists such as Bruce Jenner and Dan O'Brien. Along the way, Clay's steadily growing faith has been a significant part of the journey.

"Without my faith, I think it would be very easy for me to have a family that's in disarray, to have my priorities out of order, to make decisions that could derail my path to success. But because I have this foundation of faith, I like to believe that it's my compass. It keeps me on the path that I want to

be on. It allows me to make good decisions that bear good results. Without my faith, I think that I'd be lost and I don't think that I'd be as successful as I am today."

### **Ryan Hall – Track and Field (Marathon)**



From the very first day Ryan Hall started running at age 14 he instinctively knew it would require everything he had inside himself to be successful. It took him a little bit longer, however, to fully understand God's role in the arduous process of becoming the fastest American-born marathoner.

After briefly dropping out of college during his sophomore year at Stanford, Hall realized the results-based lifestyle he was leading was nothing but a recipe for self-loathing and depression. Since that time, the All-American long-distance runner has scored three top-four finishes at the Boston Marathon and a 10th place finish at the 2008 Olympics in Beijing.

Though he hasn't captured that elusive high-profile victory yet, Hall stands firm on one of his favorite passages of Scripture, Proverbs 24:16: "For though the righteous fall seven times, they rise again" (NIV).

"I have found that it's not the ability to never fail that makes an Olympian, but the ability to get back up. I have found that the ability to get back up comes from my ability to stay close to God and to see myself as He sees me," Hall says. "God has always given me the grace and strength to get back up after I have fallen. I have found that He has given me everything I need to accomplish what He has created me to be and to do."

### **Jonathan Horton – Gymnastics**

If prescribing the attention deficit hyperactivity disorder drug Ritalin had been popular when Jonathan Horton was a kid, he might not have found his affinity for gymnastics. To help

control their 5-year-old's chaotic energy, Horton's parents enrolled him in a training program instead of medicating him, and a future Olympic medal-winner was born.

After watching the 1996 Summer Olympics in Atlanta Horton was hooked, and his top goal became making it to the Games. He qualified for the Olympic Trials in 2004 but finished seven spots out of a place on the team. In 2008, however, Horton would not be denied. And not only did it make the team, he came home with a silver medal in the horizontal bar event and a bronze medal in the team competition.

Most recently, Horton has dealt with two broken bones and a torn ligament in his foot that he injured at the 2011 World Championships. It's been the biggest test of faith for a young man who was raised in church, but didn't get serious about God until attending college at the University of Oklahoma.

"Without my faith, I think I would be panicking," Horton says. "But sometimes I think that this could be a blessing in disguise. This could be something He's put in front of me to see how strong my faith really is. Sometimes I question if this was really necessary, but then I realize that this is God's plan and I have to overcome it and keep my faith in God. His plan is always greater than my plan."

### **Jesse Williams – Track & Field (High Jump)**



Jesse Williams likes to joke that his Olympic journey started as a baby. In an ironic sense, it's true. He attended the 1984 Los Angeles Games with his family at the young age of 7 months. It wasn't until 1992, however, after watching the Barcelona Games on TV that his dream truly took hold.

That's also about the time Williams discovered he was a natural jumper—so much so that he would make up games where jumping was a key component so he could win. Williams gravitated toward the high jump event, for which he has

captured 2010 and 2011 USA Outdoor Championships and most recently claimed his biggest prize yet with a gold medal at the 2011 World Championships in Daegu, South Korea.

Williams says that his youthful commitment to Christ has helped him deal with the inherent ups and downs of competition and the lonely moments that accompany international travel.

“I know that God has a plan for me and no matter how many times I fail I know its in Gods plan,” he explains. “I never let myself get down when I have a bad performance. I use it as inspiration to work harder. I always fall back on the Word when I am feeling lonely or when something is not going well.”

### ✘ **Tamika Catchings – Basketball**

It's been an eventful 12 months for Tamika Catchings. Last season she was named among the top 15 players in WNBA history and later league MVP for the first time in her career. Catchings is also making her third appearance as a member of the USA Women's Basketball Team and hopes to claim a third gold medal.

“The Olympics is one of the most exciting things,” she says. “It's almost one of those things that even when you talk about it, you can't fully describe the feeling—just being able to be considered one of the best in your nation.”

Catchings has overcome many adversities to get to this point. As a child, she faced hearing and speech problems, and her parents' divorce during the sixth grade. Those struggles have given her an opportunity to share a message of hope with young people through her Catch the Stars Foundation, based in Indianapolis.

“God has taught me about patience and about accepting myself for who I am and knowing that He formed me and made me unique,” she states. “He made everyone uniquely wonderful. Every single cell, every single muscle, every single thing

about my body, He created and He formed—even my personality. I never thought I'd be able to speak in front of hundreds of people and have a story and a testimony. I'm extremely blessed to have all of these opportunities."

### **Missy Franklin – Swimming**



Ever since her mother took her to a "Mom and Me" swimming class when she was 6 months old, Missy Franklin has proved to be a natural in the water. Now, at the ripe age of 17, Franklin can already point to her name in the U.S. and world record books. Most noted as a freestyle and backstroke specialist, she says her faith has steadily grown since attending Regis Jesuit High School.

"God is always there for me. I talk with Him before, during and after practice and competitions," the Pasadena, Calif., native says. "I pray to Him for guidance. I thank Him for this talent He has given me and I've promised him that I will be a positive role model for young athletes in all sports."