

Faith In the Games

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.”