

Olympics Athletes Strive for Higher Goal

Laura Wilkinson ascended the ladder to the 10-meter platform for her third dive in the final round at the 2000 Olympic Games in Sydney. Still on the mend from a broken foot, she had to wear a special shoe to make the climb at the Sydney International Aquatic Centre.

The only American to make the finals, Laura had started the night in eighth place. Two strong dives had moved her up to fifth, with three dives remaining. Commentators felt it might still be possible for Laura to capture the bronze medal, but silver and gold seemed out of reach. The amazing Chinese divers Sang Xue and Li Nu were expected to take the top two spots.

Laura curled her toes over the edge of the platform. Then she launched off and nailed a reverse two-and-a-half somersault tuck. Her scores were strong.

But so was her competition.

So what happened next astounded spectators worldwide. All four divers ahead of Laura in the standings turned in disastrous dives, catapulting Laura into first place—by one point.

Then came Dive Four—her most difficult. On the platform, Laura prayed before executing another strong dive to maintain her razor-thin lead in spite of solid performances by the other athletes.

Finally, her last dive—a backward two-and-a-half somersault with a half twist pike. It was good, averaging from the judges. Coming back up, Laura broke the water's surface with a confident fist pump. And it was enough—none of the other divers' final dives were strong enough to overtake her.

Laura's 2000 gold medal win was one of those great Olympic moments—a competitor coming from behind to gain an improbable victory.

But she turned that moment of triumph into something more than just an athletic achievement. In an interview after her win, she told the world how throughout the competition she had held tightly to Philippians 4:13: "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me" (NKJV).

That statement got widespread attention.

Some said they didn't take away much else that was said that night—from Laura or anyone else—but they did take notice when Laura quoted Scripture. "It just seemed to strike people," she said.

Again this year, for 17 days in July and August, the world's attention will be focused on the Olympic Summer Games, this time in London. The numbers are staggering: More than 10,000 athletes. A workforce of 200,000. Some 11 million tickets to be sold. During the 2008 summer Olympics, in Beijing, an estimated 4.7 billion people—70 percent of the world's population—watched on television. And this year, for the first time, every single event of the Games will also be streamed live for people to view on computers and mobile/tablet devices.

Among the athletes on the world's biggest stage will be a number of Christians who, like Laura Wilkinson in past Games, will use the opportunity to draw attention to something more important than Olympic medals—the Lord Jesus Christ.

If all goes as expected at the Olympic Trials, one of those athletes will be sprinter Allyson Felix. This would be her third Olympic Games, and she would be among the favorites to medal in the 200, the 4×100 and 4×400 relays, and either the 100 or 400. Best known for her prowess at 200 and 400 meters, she has already run the third-fastest 100 in the world this

year.

Allyson, a three-time Olympic medalist who has been called the most versatile sprinter the U.S. has ever seen, has a higher purpose than just winning races. "The biggest thing is just knowing that, win or lose, it's all about making sure that God gets the glory," she said.

The daughter of Paul Felix, who teaches at the Master's Seminary in California, Allyson has taught Sunday school and feels a special burden to work with young people. Once this year's Games are over, she said, she'll get right back into the swing of serving at her church.

During the Games in London, Christian organizations will have volunteers on hand in pedestrian corridors and transport hubs to generate conversations with visitors through creative arts and acts of kindness, and to hold chapel services and other events for people attending the Games.

Under the banner of "More Than Gold," some 1,500 Christian volunteers from 40 countries, representing many denominations and organizations, will provide hospitality and accommodation for athletes' families who could not otherwise afford to attend. They'll hand out cups of cold water and other welcome gifts, and will operate hospitality centers and street entertainment near transportation links and on pedestrian corridors leading to event venues.

They will also deploy hundreds of lay volunteers to serve travelers in airports and railway stations.

"There will be many confused and lonely people coming through London during the Games," said David Willson, CEO of More Than Gold. "These [volunteers] are going to be a lifeline for them, which makes this a great way to express Christian service."

The **outreach** will be the largest cooperative venture by U.K. churches since Billy Graham's Mission England 28 years ago,

according to Peter Meadows of More Than Gold.

Outside London—and even around the world—churches will engage with their own communities by holding sports clinics and tournaments, children's clubs and sports quizzes, all providing opportunities to share the **gospel**.

Mike Freeman, of the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association's U.K. office, has been temporarily assigned to More Than Gold for the Olympic effort. "This is a great opportunity," he said, "for church communities to engage with potentially thousands of people in a caring supportive role, actively demonstrating the love of Christ."

As you watch the Olympics this year, pray that God will use this platform to draw people to salvation. You may hear of athletes bearing witness to their faith in Christ, or of volunteers leading people to Christ.

And there may be stories you won't hear, such as what Laura Wilkinson did behind the scenes during the Beijing Olympics. Wilkinson won no medals during those Games, but what she did could make an eternal difference: She became friends with a Chinese diver, but because neither knew the other's language, Laura struggled to know how to share her faith.

Then she heard that some of the Christian volunteers had New Testaments in various languages. Laura went looking, and she found one printed in both English and Chinese. After highlighting some key passages, she gave it to her friend.

You don't need to be a world-class athlete to do that kind of thing. "God can use you wherever you are, whoever you are, whatever your background," Laura said. "We need to be available for Him to use us, because He will. If you want to glorify Him, He will use you."

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