

The Gospel According to the Olympics

How athletes and evangelists are combining to make London's Summer Olympics about more than just sports

Madeline Mims has served as an Olympic chaplain for 24 years. When she travels to London for the 2012 Games, it will be her seventh time to fill that role. But strangely, as experienced as the former gold medalist is, she has no idea what to expect.

"Each Olympiad has its own unique personality," Mims says.

One thing is for certain. The Summer Olympics in London, being held July 27 through Aug. 12, will provide much more freedom for ministry and a wider variety of evangelism opportunities than its Beijing counterpart from four years ago.

"With England being an Anglican nation, that door has been opened to make sure the religious services are filled," Mims says. "They're making sure they cover all the bases."

Mims is one of four American chaplains—two men and two women—who will minister to the entire U.S. contingency. They will join 15 international Protestant chaplains to facilitate daily chapel services, one-on-one counseling and team-specific ministry. She created the United States Council for Sports Chaplaincy (USCSC) to help support American sports chaplains as they travel to the Olympics, Track & Field World Championships, U.S. Olympic Track & Field Trials and other events.

At the Olympics, Mims often gives motivational talks for various teams throughout the two-week competitions. She sings

and shares from her personal experiences as an elite track and field athlete who made Olympic history in Mexico City in 1968 when she became the first American woman to capture gold in the 800 Meters event.

Always, she tries to bridge the gap between herself and those who don't always feel comfortable attending a formal gathering.

"A lot of times, the Christian girls [athletes] will encourage the other athletes to come hear the former Olympian talk," Mims explains. "They'll come to something like that. You may not be able to get them together to do a chapel service or anything formal like that. But you can make yourself available."

Being available means Mims has met with the U.S. women's volleyball team in a Beijing hotel and with the women's gymnastics team at a bus stop in Atlanta.

"You have to take opportunities as they come," she says. "In those situations, ministry takes place without the formula."

In the past, Mims has spent much of her time working with the track and field team, but this year that duty will be passed to another former Olympic gold medalist, Chandra Cheeseborough, head coach at Tennessee State University. Mims will utilize her connections as the chaplain to the WNBA's Tulsa Shock and work closely with the U.S. women's basketball team.

High-jumper Jesse Williams is among the many athletes who understand the importance of consistent chaplaincy. He experienced the calming effect of chapel services at the 2011 World Championships in Daegu, South Korea, where he won the gold medal.

"It put my mind at ease before competing," Williams recalls. "It's easy to get lost in the world that we live in and put

something like sports before God. But when you go to chapel, you're humbling yourself and understanding that God needs to go first in everything you do."

And though Mims appreciates the support and advocacy of the Christian athletes, she notes that their primary job is pastoral care for the entire team—not just the committed believers.

"If an athlete is a solid Christian, they don't need you as much as the others who are struggling or trying to figure out what religion they want to embrace," she says. "It's an awesome opportunity to watch the Holy Spirit work in those situations."

Beyond the Olympic Village

Outside the Olympic Village, on the London streets, numerous Christian organizations will be using the international event as the foundation for ministry to the hundreds of thousands of people who will converge on the city.

Spearheaded by its United Kingdom branch, Youth With A Mission (YWAM) represents one of the largest contingents. Its "Forever 2012" initiative is a two-year outreach that already has dispatched more than 2,000 people into various event locations. It will involve an estimated 2,000 additional missions workers during the Olympics.

YWAM, which has been actively involved in Olympic ministry dating as far back as the 1972 Summer Games in Munich, created six focus areas to effectively maximize this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. They include arts (drama, music, magic, puppetry and more), general mission and service (translating, greeting, security and waste management), prayer, social justice (outreaches to the homeless and others), sports (clinics, tournaments and more), and youth and children (school assemblies, face painting and so on).

“The focus areas were developed to give definition to the outreaches, and to help us target teams to outreach destinations,” YWAM spokesperson Jeremy Weightman says. “They also help hosting churches define what they want in terms of outreach teams.”

YWAM’s massive undertaking won’t be over when the Olympics end on Aug. 12. It has spent several months working with local churches to ensure that local residents impacted by the outreaches will be part of a bigger, life-changing picture.

“We believe that God wants to bring revival in the U.K.,” Weightman explains. “We want to see our short-term outreach efforts working alongside the long-term efforts of local churches ... and to see long-term YWAM teams established in all the Olympic host cities to partner with all that God is doing in those cities.”

This is also the purpose behind ministry efforts led by Lay Witnesses for Christ International (LWCI). Rob Rees, the organization’s U.K. managing director for Summer Olympic Outreach, is one of the 19 invited international chaplains. Like Mims, he will work inside the Olympic Village and throughout the various venues.

LWCI is heading up a collaborative effort called “More Than Gold” with several U.K. churches. Rees is excited to see what God has planned for the local fans and the spectators attending from other nations.

“Obviously there will be far more opportunities than at the Beijing games,” he says. “Our expectations are high regarding each endeavor to reach both athletes and overseas visitors with the gospel.”

Praying to Make an Impact

Mims also plans to work with LWCI. She has partnered with the

group at previous Olympics, including for its “Night of Champions” event, coordinated by LWCI President Sam Mings. It includes testimonies from athletes and performances from musical guests.

“My first ministry and my first responsibility is to the athletes in the village, but I do try to ... do some outreach,” Mims says, “especially if there are some athletes that want to do some community outreach.”

One way Mims likes to do this is by locating area prisons in the host cities and taking some of the Christian athletes with her to minister to the inmates with music and God’s Word.

“The prisons are usually overlooked,” she says. “They have no access whatsoever to the Olympic Games. This is a great opportunity to mentor some of the Christian athletes that would like to be a light and an inspiration. It’s something that [for inmates] is totally unexpected.”

Mims believes one of the best ways athletes can influence the world for Christ is with those brief moments on camera, when they’re either competing or giving interviews. A group of trusted believers continually prays with her for the influence of these Olympians, who have been blessed with a sizeable platform.

“They have this moment in time, standing on a field or on a track or in a pool or in a ring,” she says. “The world is watching everything they do. How do they respond to winning or losing, doing their best or not doing their best? I’ve been praying for those who are in the body of Christ—that the light of God would just shine through them.”

Mims also prays for the media so they might ask questions that will give these athletes a chance to respond in a way that glorifies God. She is reminded of the first post-race interview she gave after her history-making run in 1968.

"I know the Holy Spirit must have led this reporter to ask this question because I'd never heard it before," Mims says.

After the landmark victory, the reporter asked "Who do you give the glory to?"

"I just looked at him," she says. "You have to realize that this is coming at a time when no athletes were sharing their faith on television. So I said: 'I'm running for Jesus. That's who all the glory goes to.'"

"He looked at me really strange and said, 'We're not talking religion here.' And I said: 'I'm not either. I'm just trying to answer your question.' And he turned to the camera and said, 'We'll be right back after these messages.'"

Mims laughs at the memory, but she's quickly sobered by the thought that her brief response went across the world. Years later she met people from the former Yugoslavia who remembered the interview and were taken aback at her open statement of faith in Christ.

American gymnast Jonathan Horton mirrors Mims' sentiment. After winning silver and bronze at the 2008 Beijing Games, he hopes to make the 2012 team and use whatever spotlight he might enjoy as a vehicle to be a witness to nonbelievers around the world.

"That's always been my prayer," Horton says. "I pray every night ... that He takes the platform He's given me and uses me—speaks through me, not only through my words but through my actions as an athlete."

Horton attends Second Baptist Church in Houston and recalls a message from his pastor, Ed Young, that challenged him to be more proactive as an outspoken Christian athlete: "He asked the question, 'When is it right to hide your faith, and when is it right to show your faith?' He told us that when you feel like hiding it, you need to show it, and when you feel like

you're being prideful and you want to show it, hide it.

"It would be really easy when you're on live TV and the whole world is watching you to want to hide your faith. You want to avoid the persecution that the world is going to give you for it. But it's in that moment when I really need to show it. That's when I need to use my platform as a gymnast to show what the Lord has done for me."

Chad Bonham *is a veteran journalist and author based in Broken Arrow, Okla. His latest book, Glory of the Games, takes a look at biblical principles through the stories of current and former Olympic athletes.*

To read about other Christian ministries and athletes at the Games [click here](#).