

The Heart of a Champion

Written by Jeffrey L. Boney
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Every four years, people from all over the world get to witness one of the greatest tests of the human will and one of the most spectacular competitive events known to man: the Olympics.

Both the Summer Olympics and Winter Olympics, which alternate every two years between each other, take place every four years respectively and have over 13,000 athletes competing in 33 different sports and nearly 400 events. The Olympic Games bring everyone across the globe so many memorable and inspiring moments, from the traveling and lighting of the torch, to the Olympic flag and Olympic rings, to the opening and closing ceremonies, to the awarding of Olympic medals, to the athletes who compete in those various sporting events.

Every athlete who competes wants to end up standing at the top of the podium, having received a Gold medal for finishing #1 in their respective competitive event. There is a first, second, and third place winner in each event who will receive a gold, silver, and bronze medal, respectively. We just had the privilege of watching athletes from the United States of America proudly represent their country and compete to be #1 at the 2012 Summer Olympics in London, England. To accomplish this task is a phenomenal feat, when you consider that more than 200 nations are represented and have athletes competing at the Olympics. But for those that do end up on the podium, either as a gold medalist or not, they can forever share with the world that they competed on the grandest stage and were honored because of their talent and skill. Then there are those that don't win medals, but they win the hearts of the viewers of the Olympics because of their stories, their heart and their determination. See, it is at the Olympics that the media provides otherwise unknown athletes with the opportunity to receive international attention and fame and inspire others to go the extra mile. There were so many stories that came from these Olympics that should overly inspire anyone who cares to pay attention.

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There are stories like Gabrielle “Gabby” Douglas.

It is rare that we know the back story on people that these athletes encounter. Douglas' mother Natalie Hawkins, a struggling single mother of four, filed for bankruptcy twice according to federal court records, while struggling to make ends meet. In the midst of the struggles, she made the tough decision to send her, then 14-year-old daughter Gabby, to live with a white family in Iowa that she didn't even know, because she wanted her daughter to have the best coach she could to help her accomplish her goal of being an Olympic champion. Well, after all that hard work and effort, both of their dreams paid off when at 16 years of age, Douglas became the first gymnast and first woman of color in Olympic history to win gold in both the individual all-around and team competitions in artistic gymnastics at the same Olympics. On August 3, the Kellogg Company announced that it was featuring Douglas standing on the podium with her gold medal on their special-edition boxes of Corn Flakes in the fall and is estimated to gain endorsement deals worth a potential \$100 million dollars.

Or what about Oscar Pistorius, the 25 year old South African runner, who became the first double leg amputee to participate in the Olympics when he entered the men's 400 meters race and was part of South Africa's 4x400 meter relay team at the 2012 Summer Olympics in London?

Did you hear what I said? The man had both legs amputated halfway between his ankles and knees at 11 months old, after being diagnosed with fibular hemimelia (congenital absence of the fibula) in both legs, and he just competed against able-bodied men at the Olympic Games. Pistorius made the semifinals in the men's 400 meters, but gained the respect of many people in the track and field world. Pistorius failed to qualify for the 400 meter finals, but after the semifinal heat, the eventual 400 meter Olympic gold medalist Kirani James traded nametags with Pistorius. He admired the courage and sportsmanship of Pistorius and was motivated to use that same courage to do something that had never been done before. Until this Olympics, the extremely small Caribbean island of Grenada had never had an Olympic medalist in ANY event. Now it has not only its' first medal, but a gold medal after James, a 19-year-old nicknamed the “Jaguar,” who crushed his competition in one of track and field's toughest races. What about Manteo Mitchell of the U.S., who ran the opening leg of the 4x400 meter relay, only to break his left fibula? At around 200 meters into the race, Mitchell realized he had the injury, but refused to give up, handing the baton over to his teammate to ensure the USA qualified for the semifinals. USA finished with a time of 2:58.87 - the fastest time in the qualifiers. Mitchell said that the break was caused by an awkward slip on the stairs a few days earlier, but got treatment and was feeling fit for the race. As to the reason why Mitchell didn't quit, he said, “I didn't want to let those three guys down or the team down, so I just ran on it. It hurt so bad.”

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Then there is Bryshon Nellum, the 23 year old runner from the U.S., who almost had his career cut short after being shot three times in the left thigh and right hamstring while walking out of a college Halloween party at a nightclub located just two blocks from his University of Southern California campus. He was told that he would never be able to run again, but fought back and fought hard to train and qualify for the Olympics, helping the U.S. win a silver medal in the 4x400 meter relay. He was also tapped to carry the flag for the U.S. during the closing ceremonies. There are so many stories of triumph and defeat. There are many stories of joy and sadness. There are many stories of victory and disappointment. These athletes train so hard, year in and year out, to be the very best and compete on the highest stage. We should hope to be as fortunate as to find out more about and learn from each and every Olympic athlete, who all have a story that can help us grow. These athletes commit themselves to the rigors of training and development, coupled with the tireless sacrifices that come along with being the best, and we can ALL learn from them.

Let's applaud ALL of the athletes who represented the U.S.A. and all of their respective countries and do our best to be as committed as they were to be the very best in what we do. {comments on}