

# The Joy Found in Effort

## Lessons from the Olympic Games

By Candace Karu

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In a few short months the world will turn its attention to China and the games of the XXIX Olympiad. As in years past, we will watch eagerly, expecting American teams to excel in sports like swimming, basketball, gymnastics, and of course, track and field.

Conversely there is every likelihood that U.S. athletes will have their asses handed to them in competitions like rhythmic gymnastics, table tennis, and badminton. Medal counts will be debated and records will be reviewed, while spectators prepare to witness not only contests among the best athletes in the world, but also a celebration of brotherhood and goodwill across political, national, and racial boundaries.

Along with the arrival of the Olympics there is the inevitable accompanying media phenomenon. Advertisers, always ready to exploit the emotional connection Americans have to the games, create ads that capitalize on our national obsession. Tears will be jerked from the eyes of captive audiences throughout the land as they watch beer commercials that salute the athletes headed to Beijing. The usual fare -- guys on game day crowded on couches -- gives way to more emotional vignettes: a dad waving good-bye as his child-athlete boards a bus at the edge of a corn field, duffle slung over one shoulder and the sun setting over the other. Local news segments concentrate less on, say, the obesity epidemic sweeping the region and more on up-close-and-personal segments about athletes. You've seen them. There's a local competitor, usually a teen, but occasionally a masters-aged phenom, who is on the verge of realizing the dream of making an Olympic team.

Although these commercials and Olympic moments can sometimes feel manipulative and cliché, they never fail to affect me. No matter how many times I see that kid board the bus to compete on the world stage, I am always moved. A part of me, and anyone else whose heart isn't made of granite, goes with that athlete and all the others who compete against the best in the world. I'm not too cynical to be riveted by the personal histories, no matter how hackneyed or trite. Yes, we've seen it many times before, tiny girls from obscure Baltic countries emerging from grim cement buildings in the dark, headed to the gym for workout after grueling workout. We've heard the stories of supportive mothers, demanding coaches, and a lifetime of overcoming adversity, politics, and pressure in order to compete against the best in the world.

I don't know about you, but this kind of pre-Olympic media buildup has physical as well as psychological effects on me and on my training, a kind of "I want what they're having" Pavlovian response. As a society, we have become jaded and cynical about the integrity of amateur athletics, and with good reason. Doping, endorsement deals, political wrangling, price gouging, and poor sportsmanship have become part of the Olympic landscape. Still, in spite of the influence of a tainted culture, the Olympics, in their purest form, have the potential to bring out the best in everyone -- athletes, organizers, host countries, and spectators. And as a dedicated spectator, I find myself bathed in the glow of it; I want to live up to the Olympic ideal of pursuing excellence.

I confess that I am a fair-weather fan, never a true fanatic. I can't recite most elite runners' PRs, nor do I always recognize the names of the top runners if they finish out of the top five. The athletes I follow, the ones I truly connect with, are the ones whose stories I know. Ours is a sport that falls pretty far down the athletic food chain; the list of running superstars is a pretty short one. But every four years, for a brief time, our heroes are America's, and often the world's, heroes. Watching them perform, seeing the results of their training, crying as the national anthem plays for the runner at the top of the podium, triggers a switch somewhere deep inside me. That, friends, is when I get inspired.

During the pre-Olympic media buildup, I find that the flipped switch somehow causes me to wake up an hour earlier mid-week to get in a second long run. Recalling the efforts of the Olympians, and the hundreds of hopefuls who didn't make the team, changes how I think about my own training. After watching the men's Olympic marathon trials, I can be convinced to trade an easy run along the beach road for a killer track workout or a set of mile repeats. Even trips to the grocery store are influenced by the energy generated by the games. Ryan Hall, Brian Sell and Dathan Ritzenhein aren't rounding out their menu choices with Doritos and chili cheese fries as they hone their training for the marathon in Beijing. That encourages me, in a show of Olympian resolve, to stride determinedly past the Ben & Jerry's Phish Food, whose siren song calls to me, and head directly to the produce aisle.

The Olympic Charter states that the spirit of the Olympics "seeks to create a way of life based on the joy found in effort, the educational value of good example and respect for universal fundamental ethical principles." Those words, and the example of Olympic athletes, pretty much capture the way I aspire to live my own running life.

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