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The 2016 Olympic Games in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, brought together over 11,000 athletes from 207 countries for two weeks of intense athletic competition. These dedicated athletes, who spent years of grueling training for their moment in the Olympic arena, provided billions of people around the world with examples of athletic excellence worth remembering.

The International Olympic Committee (IOC) lists excellence as one of its core values, which means “giving one’s best on the field of play or in the professional arena. It is not only about winning, but also about participating, making progress against personal goals, striving to be and to do our best in our daily lives and benefitting from the healthy combination of a strong body, mind and will.” Excellence reflects the Olympic motto, Citius, Altius, Fortius (Faster, Higher, Stronger). It is measured by head–to-head competition, but “the primary barometer of excellence will be reaching one’s personal objectives.”

The pursuit of excellence in athletic competition reflects our essential nature as self-transcending human beings. We are oriented to Mystery, made for union with God, wired for the transcendent. No finite reality, no success or accomplishment can totally satisfy the deepest longings of our hearts. We are the fascinating and awesome combination of infinite longings and finite capabilities. The eyes of faith can detect in healthy competition the presence of God the Source of our energy and the Goal of our striving. The joy of victory and the agony of defeat speak to us of the paschal dimension of life, sharing in the death and resurrection of Christ. The disciplined cooperation fostered by team sports puts us in touch with the unifying power of the Holy Spirit. Athletic competition can easily get out of control, but at its best it has the power to manifest the human drive for excellence that directs us to God.

The Rio Games produced a number of star athletes who exemplified the quest for excellence. The one who drew the most attention was the Jamaican sprinter, Usain Bolt, who was competing in his third Olympics after winning three gold medals in both of the 2008 Olympics in Beijing and the 2012 Games in London. His first event in Rio was the 100 meter dash. The crowd in Maracana Stadium swelled. Other athletes gathered to watch. The television networks played it up, ensuring that millions around the world would be watching. As the race is about to begin, Bolt, a natural showman, plays to the crowd, pointing to the camera and acknowledging his fans. He settles into the blocks in lane six, making the sign of the cross and pointing his index finger to the sky. When the gun sounds he does not get a good start, falling behind almost all his competitors, including his main rival, Justin Gatlin, of the United States. Midway through the race, Bolt powers past the whole field and nips Gatlin at the finish line. After the race, the Jamaican sprinter touched the Miraculous Medal he always wears, which, evidently, was an expression of his devotional Catholicism. Exuberant in victory, he blew kisses to the crowd, embraced some adoring fans, did a victory lap and kissed the track. His celebration included his signature gesture, the “To Di World” pose, commonly called the “Lightning Bolt,” where he cocks his right elbow and points his extended left arm and index finger toward the sky. He first assumed this pose at the 2008 Olympics, playfully imitating a dance move popular in Jamaica at the time. Since then, he has invested his iconic victory gesture with deeper meaning suggested by his comment, ”I feel connected to the people of the world when I do it.”

 The millions of people who watched this race saw in action one of the greatest athletes of all time: the fastest human being ever timed; the greatest sprinter in the history of the Olympic Games; a man who sustained unequaled dominance over the world’s best for twelve years and three Olympiads. In an exciting 9.38 seconds, we saw athletic excellence in action as the lanky 6’5” Jamaican sprinter outran his world class competition with long powerful strides. We witnessed the joy of sports in Bolt’s engaging pre-race routine and his victory celebration. Millions of fans were caught up in the moment, lifted out of the ordinary, thrust into an experience of transcendence. We witnessed intense competition generating human excellence. We marveled at what God-given talent honed by disciplined effort can accomplish. Here was athletic competition in a pure and simple form: human beings side by side striving to run as fast as they can to reach a finish line 100 meters ahead. Bolt got there before the others, proving once again he is the greatest sprinter we have known.

The world got to see Usain Bolt perform a second time in the 200 meter race, his favorite event. Bolt is a man of lofty ambition, once saying he wanted to be ranked with Ali and Pele, right up there in the public estimation with the American heavyweight boxer and the Brazilian footballer. His goal in the 200 meter was to break his own world record of 19:19, perhaps lowering it below 19 seconds. A heavy rain fell in Rio some 20 minutes before the 200 meter finals, making it harder for Bolt to achieve his dream. As the sprint actually unfolded he had a great first 100 meters and coming out of the turn in lane six he was in good position. He reached the finish line easily ahead of his closest competitor, Andre de Grasse of Canada. As expected, he had once again exerted his dominance in this event. However, the anguished look on his face as he crossed the finish line registered his keen disappointment that he had failed to achieve his dream of breaking his world record. In interviews afterward, Bolt expressed his disappointment: “I wanted to run a faster time,” but my legs decided “we’re not going to go any faster.” Although he was not “fully happy” with his performance, he tried to put the whole matter in perspective. He was happy that he won the 100 and 200 meter gold medal in three straight Olympics, especially since no other runners had won even two in a row. Referring to his training routine, he said, “I’ve worked hard and I’ve pushed myself to be the best.” With the doping scandals in mind, he insisted: “I’ve proved to the world you can do it clean.” Proud of his accomplishments on the track, he declared: “I’ve made the sport exciting, made people want to watch it. I’ve put the sport on a different level.”

 Fans around the globe thrilled to Bolt’s victory in the 200 meter as they did the 100. Once again there are important lessons to be learned. Bolt was competing not only against seven other world-class sprinters, but also against his own personal best, which set up much of the drama in the event. In sports, as in life, we do well to concentrate on competing against ourselves, on striving to develop our potential, on making progress. An overemphasis on competing against others fosters a comparative mode of living which leads to either a prideful self-righteousness or a debilitating sense of failure. There is a healthy form of competition which calls forth one’s best efforts while respecting the opponent. The Olympic core values of excellence and respect are not mutually exclusive but can fruitfully interact. The problem in contemporary culture is that winning becomes an absolute, an idol to be pursued at all costs, as exemplified by the extensive Russian state–run doping program that led to disqualifying over 100 athletes from competing in Rio. Placing more emphasis on reaching one’s own personal objectives is a good way to avoid idol making in sports and in ordinary life. Our Christian faith warns us against comparing ourselves to others and encourages us to respond as best we can to the God who calls us by name.

 Usain Bolt also encourages us to keep failures in perspective. Although he was deeply disappointed by his failure to set a new world record, he remained proud of his disciplined effort and joyfully celebrated his victory. Sports have the capacity to instruct us in dealing constructively with failure. Participants in sports usually lose more often than they win. Only one team wins the championship and only one individual wins an event. We celebrate sportsmanship that is gracious in victory and unbowed in defeat. It is possible to compete wholeheartedly in athletic competition and to feel satisfied in doing our best even though we fall short. Defeats can prompt renewed efforts and better results. Our Christian belief in the saving power of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ fosters a paschal imagination especially attuned to the possibility of new life emerging from various forms of death. Confessing deadly sins, for example, can lead to renewed spiritual vigor. Failures to reach our goals can prompt more effective efforts. For Christians, defeats need not be totally devastating. When we get knocked down, our faith encourages us to stand tall again. Faith prompts us to keep athletic defeats in perspective so they do not define us or cause us undue distress. In turn, sports can strengthen our paschal imagination by forcing us to deal with inevitable failures.

Usain Bolt went on to win his ninth gold medal as the anchor for the Jamaican team in the 4x100 meter relay. He took the baton with a slight lead going into the last leg and won going away. Afterward, he celebrated with his teammates, who think of him as “an immortal” but also as a great teammate with a generous spirit and a common touch. In interviews afterwards, he spoke of the great pressure he was under, his relief that it was over, and his pride in his accomplishments. The 29 year old sprinter also repeated that this would be his last Olympics. When he kissed the track after the relay, it was a way of saying goodbye to Olympic competition. If this is the last Olympics for him, he bowed out as the greatest sprinter of all time; a triple–triple winner with three medals in three consecutive Olympiads; a charismatic personality who at least reminds us of Ali and Pele.