

Testing Positive for Dedication

Smog is not a performance-enhancing drug. All the same, aspiring U. S. Olympians may test positive for carbon monoxide as they train for the Beijing games.

China hosts the Olympics this summer. That means athletes will compete in an environmental killing field where pollution levels top out at five times the World Health Organization's redline. American boxers did their roadwork in the hotel hallways during a recent competition. One cyclist hawked up black phlegm from sucking down the mushroom clouds of gunk. He was riding indoors at the time.

Knowing what they face, competitors have begun asking their coaches if they should jog behind busses or train on freeways during rush hour. Exercise physiologist Randy Wilber says that both of these are bad strategies but worries all the same about the suicidal dedication of top-tier athletes. "If they thought locking themselves in the garage with the car running would help them win a gold medal," he recently told the New York Times, "I'm sure they would do it."

Is this drive to succeed insane? Or is the drive healthy and the success insane? Would a person perhaps be crazy to do less in order to gain more?

"Everyone who competes in the games," Paul observes in 1 Corinthians 9.25, "exercises self-control in all things. They then do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable."

Ask Mark Spitz how long the cheering lasts even if you multiply the gold medals seven times – or even unto seventy times seven. Indeed, if you are less than forty years old, ask someone who Mark Spitz is.

Paul trained for toxic competition because the contest boasted eternal rewards. Second Corinthians 11.26 lists the triple-triathlon of kamikaze commitment by which he readied himself to receive the victor's wreath. In the end a Roman ax, not metropolitan pollution, dealt the final insult to his windpipe. He saw the executioner's block as nothing more than the victor's podium where he stood to receive the crown (2 Tim 4.8).

Smog is not a performance enhancing drug, but for the Christian the asceticism of accepted suffering is. We who signed on to run faith's marathon in the sin-sludged atmosphere of a fallen world, are we even bothering to go for an occasional stroll outside the rarified atmosphere of our evangelical ghettos? Do small steps of spiritual discipline daily toughen our hearts against the real crucifixion of the flesh?

John Henry Newman, that crafty old coach of the soul, wrote out a useful regimen for beginners when he urged, "[Jesus] bids you take up your cross; therefore accept the daily opportunities which occur of yielding to others, when you need not yield, and of doing unpleasant services, which you might avoid." Try a few trotted paces with these minor-league footmen and – who knows? – we might one day find ourselves ready to run in the real horse race through the persecution-polluted thickets of the Jordan (Jer 12.5).

Cough! Cough!
Doug