



CREDO | STUART WEIR

An Olympics where it's OK not to be OK is the winner

Stuart Weir
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I was privileged to be at the recent Olympic Games in Tokyo as a sports writer,

but also trying to offer some spiritual support to athletes. One of the issues to emerge from the experience of sport in a pandemic has been consideration of the mental health of athletes.

The American gymnast Simone Biles had the courage and honesty to talk about the challenges that she faced. At one level she had it all — world champion by the age of 16, four Olympic gold medals at the age of 19. Yet she said that gymnastics was all consuming, resulting in some undesirable side effects. She said that in Tokyo she had

realised that she was “more than my accomplishments and gymnastics, which I never truly believed”.

She was opening up about a common tension for athletes. Sport promotes a performance-driven identity. You are judged on your performance. If you win a medal, you are a success. Everyone wants a piece of you. If you do not make the final, you are a loser and can feel of no value. If you win, Nike may be dangling a lucrative contract in front of you. If it all goes wrong, you may need to find another job.

Athletes are told they need to be mentally strong. Talking about mental health has tended to be seen as a weakness. An athlete talking about mental health was told to “man-up” or was dismissed as not being resilient enough, not able to stand the pressure. Sports psychologists were employed to make athletes mentally tougher. Coaches would routinely bully athletes to supposedly make them tougher. Now we are much quicker to recognise mental or spiritual needs as being as important as physical.

Tokyo 2020 brought additional pressures, with athletes only allowed into the Olympic Village a few days before their competition and expected to leave shortly afterwards.

In the village they lived like prisoners, allowed to leave only for training or competition. No sight-seeing. No shopping. No family or friends to celebrate or commiserate with.

Normally at an Olympics there are opportunities for athletes to attend religious services, whether Christian, Muslim, Buddhist or Jewish, and there are clergy and sports chaplains available to help athletes navigate the pressures of elite competition. In Tokyo any such support was virtual, with no chaplains allowed into the Olympic Village.

A recent comment on Twitter by the respected athletics coach Stuart McMillan gives a helpful commentary on the issue: “Our ego often pushes us to perform out of a place of fear, of needing to show the world that I’m good enough. When we can let go of that noise, and realise that competition is about getting the most out of ourselves, we can fulfil our potential.”

We are loved by God for who we are — not because of what we can do. If an athlete understands that they are significant because God created them and loves them, they are free to compete and use the gifts they have been given. They do not have to be successful to prove themselves worthy of God’s love.

Nicola McDermott, a high-jumper who won silver for Australia in Tokyo, said after her competition: “Jumping with the peace that you are loved can take you to heights you have never seen before. I have been able to enjoy the process and not really be impacted in who I truly am as I have been more exposed to success and the spotlight. I believe that is a very core of my being, my faith in God which remains the same whether performances increase or decrease. That is the hope that I hang on to like an anchor. Eventually my sporting life will end but I know that these things will never fade away.”

Abigail Irozuru, the British long-jumper and Tokyo finalist, shares that view: “Being a Christian means that I want to do everything with excellence because that is what I believe we are called to do as followers of Jesus. Understanding that it is all by God’s grace has helped. When I remember that it takes the weight off my shoulders and stops me putting pressure on myself. It helps me to enjoy competing.

“I love the quotation from Eric Liddell, ‘God made me for a purpose but he also made me fast and when I run I feel his pleasure’, and I want to feel God’s pleasure when I jump.”

The Tokyo Games were like none other, where athletes with a faith seemed to rely on it more heavily than usual and where it was recognised that it was all right not to be all right and that athletes were much more than just physical beings.

Stuart Weir is director of Verité Sport, a charity that promotes a Christian presence in sport