



Running the Race to Win

A brother confessed to Abba Sisoës: “I fell, Father. What do I do now?”

“Get up,” the holy elder told him, with his characteristic simplicity.

“I got up, Father, but I fell again into the cursed sin,” the brother confessed grievously.

“And what prevents you from getting up again?”

“Until when?” asked the brother.

“Until death finds you, whether standing or falling down. It is written, ‘wherever I shall find you, there I will also judge you,’ the elder explained. ‘Just pray to God that you are found at your last moment standing upright in holy repentance.’”



Derek Redmond, a young British runner, isn’t a name that conjures up memories of Olympic gold medalists. In fact, his efforts at the Olympics were officially recorded as “race abandoned.” But it’s Derek who defines the essence of the human spirit, and his determination to finish his race won the hearts of millions of fans.



the 4-x-400-meter

Derek skyrocketed to fame by shattering his country’s 400-meter record at age 19. He was an excellent athlete and demonstrated his world-class speed for several years in numerous track events.

- European junior finalist and top Great Britain competitor in 1984
- Broke the British record in the 400-meter for the first time in 1985 in a time of 44.82 seconds beating the 10-year-old mark set by David Jenkins. Then in 1987 reclaiming the record from Roger Black in 44.5 seconds
- Derek held the record until it was broken in 1992 by just three one-hundredths of a second
- Commonwealth & European Champion in 4-x-400-meter Relay in 1986
- World silver medalist in 1987
- World Gold Medalist in the 4-x-400-meter Relay in 1991 in setting yet another British European and Commonwealth record and also running the second fastest time ever recorded for

All, however, had not been smooth running for Derek. Common runners’ injuries had sidelined him repeatedly. In 1988 Derek had earned the right to represent his country in the Summer Olympics in Seoul, Korea. But only 90 seconds before his qualifying heat in the 400-meter race, he was forced to withdraw because of a pulled Achilles tendon. That injury resulted in five surgeries, including one on his Achilles tendon less than four months before the games began in Barcelona. But through grueling therapy and an indefatigable determination, Derek somehow managed to qualify.

Derek's father Jim had accompanied him to all the world competitions. They were as close as a father and son could be. Inseparable, really. The best of friends. When Derek ran, it was as if his father were running right next to him. He had an excellent chance of winning the gold medal.

Jim was a sports dad who changed his whole life for the sake of his son. He changed jobs. He moved to different cities to find the best training for him. He'd used much of his own money to finance Derek's training. He'd gotten up early on countless mornings and rode his bike alongside Derek as he ran, timing him and encouraging him. Jim was there during the numerous operations and had dedicated his life to helping his son compete in an Olympics race.



all his life.

It was Monday night, August 3, 1992 at the Olympics in Barcelona, Spain. 65,000 fans streamed into the stadium. Millions more were watching on television around the world. Tuning in from England were Derek's mother and pregnant sister. As race time approached for the semifinal 400-meter heat, Derek's dad headed up to his seat at the top of stadium, not far from where the Olympic torch had been lit just a few days earlier.

Derek lined up, waved to the crowds, and drank in the excitement of the moment. Everything seemed to be coming together for him at last. He was the favorite in the 400 meters. He was running well: he recorded the fastest time of the first round and he won his quarterfinal heat. Derek was ready to realize his lifelong dream of earning a gold medal in the 400-meter dash. He had trained well and his father had also instilled in him the virtues of honor, courage, determination and faith. He said he wanted to win to honor his father who had supported him

The gun fired, and Derek shot out of the starting blocks in an unbelievable start. He broke quickly in lane five, quickly making up the stagger on the runners in lanes six through eight. "Keep it up, keep it up," his dad kept saying to himself. Heading down the backstretch, only 250 meters from the finish line, Derek seemed a shoe-in to win this heat and qualify for the Olympic finals.

He was on a world record time as he saw the finish line while rounding the turn into the backstretch. Suddenly Derek heard a pop, followed by a shooting pain that ran up his leg. His Achilles tendon had just torn. His face turned ashen. His leg quivering, Derek began hopping on one leg, then slowed down and fell to the track. His face contorted in response to the physical pain he was feeling. He grabbed his leg and rolled around on the ground. Those who were in close proximity heard him scream out in agony.

All the years, the sweat, the pain, the sacrifice; all of his training had come down to these few minutes in time, and then this had to happen. Tears poured down Derek's face, and all he could think was, "I don't want to take a DNF" (runner's jargon for Did-Not-Finish). Derek couldn't stand the thought of having DNF written beside his name at the Olympics.



Lying there, Derek looked at all the other racers streaking far ahead of him. There was absolutely no way for him to catch up. The dream was dead. At this very second, he had a choice to make. Was he going to accept his fate and give up (which would have been perfectly understandable) or was he going to go the distance and finish the race?

Paramedics rushed to assist him as he lay writhing in pain on the ground. For most runners the race would have ended there. But not for Derek. As the medical crew arrived with a stretcher, he waved them off, "No, there's no way I'm getting on that stretcher. I'm going to finish my race!"

He made a decision, a *hard* decision, one he knew would be filled with great pain and would *not* lead to glory, but one that would bring his journey full circle. In agony, Derek struggled to his feet and immediately felt the pain of the torn tendon surge through his body. He began to hop and limp the best he could around the track, giving it everything he had to reach the finish line. Quitting was not a part of his vocabulary.

The stunned crowd couldn't believe what they were seeing. Gradually, they realized that Derek was *not* dropping out of the race. He was *not* limping off the track in defeat, but was actually continuing on one leg, in a fiercely determined effort to make it to the finish

line. One painful step at a time, each one a little slower and more agonizing than the one before, Derek limped onward. The crowd began to cheer for him. The fans rose to their feet and their cries grew louder and louder, building into a thunderous roar. Fellow competitors, family, commentators, fans of all countries were immediately won over by Derek's determination. At no other time in sports history has an athlete had so much support while finishing last.



Through the searing pain, Derek heard the cheers, but "I wasn't doing it for the crowd," he would later say. "I was doing it for me. Whether people thought I was an idiot or a hero, I wanted to finish the race. I'm the one who has to live with it."

The television cameras had been focused on defending Olympic champion Steve Lewis as he won the race. As soon as he'd crossed the finish line, the cameras went back to Derek. About thirty seconds had elapsed, and he was still far from the finish line.

Yet, with all of this, it still was no lock that he could endure the pain long enough to make it.

Then the drama took a new twist. There was a stir at the top of the stands. Jim Redmond, seeing his son in trouble, was desperately working his way down toward the track, sidestepping some people and bumping into others. "Pardon me. Excuse me, please. Coming through!" He'd watched his son train for this moment for four years. His son had come to Barcelona for one reason: to finish this race. He knew how important that was to Derek, and he was willing to do whatever it took to see his son achieve that goal.

Jim had no Olympic credentials. He wasn't supposed to be on the track, but all he could think about was getting to his son, to help him up. He was absolutely single-minded about this, and was not going to be stopped by anyone.

Jim reached the bottom of the stands, vaulted over the railing, dodged a security guard, and ran to his son — with two security people running after him.



"That's my son out there," he yelled back at his pursuers, "and I'm going to help him."

Finally Jim reached his son at the final curve, about 120 meters from the finish, and wrapped his arm around his waist. Derek initially tried to push him away, not realizing who he was, but then he heard his father say, "Derek, it's me," and "You don't have to do this."

"Yes, I do," Derek said, through clenched teeth.

"Well, then," said Jim, without hesitating, "we're going to finish this together."

Derek put his arms around his father's shoulders and sobbed. Together, arm in arm, father and son struggled toward the finish line with 65,000 people cheering, clapping, and crying.



Derek's mom and sister were watching the race back home on television. His sister was pregnant and her contractions began, in what was later determined to be false labor. His mother was weeping for her son and husband as they took each painful step on the track. In the stadium the crowd was standing and cheering. Together they remained faithful to the goal. A couple of steps from the finish line, and with the crowd in an absolute frenzy, Jim released the grip he had on his son, so Derek could cross the finish line by himself. Afterwards, Jim threw his arms around Derek again and both were crying, as was everyone else in the stands and on TV.

The video footage has become one of the most enduring sporting images of modern times. In fact, Oliver Irish, columnist for the UK based "Observer" called it one of the top ten "teary moments" in sports. He said, "Not many moments ... remain so poignant that they can reduce grown men to tears, but this is a bona fide weepy."

"I'm the proudest father alive," Jim told the press afterwards, tears in his eyes. "I'm prouder of him than I would have been if he had won the gold medal. It took a lot of guts for him to do what he did."

Interviewed after this incredible race, Derek said that his father was the only one who could help him, because he was the only one who knew what he'd been through. Later, when asked about his decision to hop on, Derek continued, "I wasn't going to let an injury keep me from finishing."

Derek didn't win an Olympic Gold Medal, but he came away with something more valuable. Life often throws pain at us. Many times we surrender and allow the caretakers to run to our aid and give up on our goal. But Derek had two things working for him that day: the desire to run the complete race; and a father whose love for his son surpassed any obstacle in his way.

Epilogue

"It is the part of a noble athlete to be wounded, and yet to conquer. And especially we ought to bear all things for the sake of God, that He also may bear with us, and bring us into His kingdom. Add more and more to thy diligence; run thy race with increasing energy; weigh carefully the times. Whilst thou art here, be a conqueror; for here is the course, and there are the crowns. Look for Christ, the Son of God; who was before time, yet appeared in time; who was invisible by nature, yet visible in the flesh; who was impalpable, and could not be touched, as being without a body, but for our sakes became such, might be touched and handled in the body; who was impassable as God, but became passable for our sakes as man; and who in every kind of way suffered for our sakes." (**The Epistle of Ignatius to Polycarp, Chapter 3**)

I love that story. That's what God does for us when we place our trust in Him. When we are experiencing pain and we're struggling to finish the race, we can be confident that we have a loving Father who won't let us do it alone. He left His place in Heaven to come alongside us in the person of His Son, Jesus Christ. "I am with you always," says Jesus to His followers, "even to the end of the age." (**Matthew 28:20, The Orthodox Study Bible**)

When I'm on my deathbed, I want to be able to say: "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith." Finally, there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will give to me on that Day, and not to me only but also to all who have loved His appearing. (**II Timothy 4:7-8, The Orthodox Study Bible**) And when I make it Home, I want to hear the Lord tell me, "Well done, good and faithful servant" (**Matthew 25:23, The Orthodox Study Bible**). That's the only thing that really counts.

