

Ripples

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The most important thing in the Olympic Games is not to win but to take part, just as the most important thing in life is not the triumph but the struggle. The essential thing is not to have conquered but to have fought well. – *Pierre De Coubertin, founder, Modern Olympic Games*

The 2012 London Summer Olympic Games are upon us. For the next two weeks, the world will once again witness some of the most spectacular feats of athletic prowess. Gathered in one city are thousands of top rate athletes competing in hundreds of disciplines to challenge themselves and each other in the pursuit of the Olympic Creed of *Citius, Altius, Fortius* (faster, higher, stronger).

The Olympic Games (both the summer and winter versions) have long provided the world with amazing stories of triumph on the field, on the track and on the court. There is gymnast Nadia Comaneci of Romania, who as a 14 year old scored 7 perfect 10s on her way to winning 3 gold medals in the 1976 Montreal Olympics. There is sprinter Jess Owens of the United States who shattered the myth of supposed Nazi-Aryan Supremacy at the 1936 Berlin Games by winning 4 gold medals. Then there is Teofilo Stevenson, the heavyweight boxer from Cuba who refused to turn professional (and also refused millions of dollars in prize money) to continue serving his country as an amateur. He went on to win the gold medal in three successive Olympics (1972 Munich, 1976 Montreal and 1980 Moscow). Every time the games are held, there are also stories that are not about gold medal winners but instead embody the true spirit behind the Olympic Games. Here are a few of them.¹

Richard “Rink” Babka, Discus Throw, Rome 1960 - Olympic great Al Oerter of the USA, who won four successive gold medals as a discus thrower. owes a lot to his teammate Rink Babka. Oerter appeared headed for defeat in the Rome Games as Babka led Oerter. Studying his teammate's technique, Babka noticed Oerter's left arm was out of position before he threw and made some suggestions so that Oerter could make a longer throw. Oerter heeded Babka's suggestion, adjusted his windup, and threw the discus. The effort set an Olympic record and was good for gold. Babka, who gave the advice, settled for silver.²

John Stephen Akhwari, Marathon, Mexico 1968- Akhwari competed in the marathon. At some point in the race, there was jockeying for position between several runners and as a result Akhwari was hit. He fell badly, wounding his knee and injuring his shoulder. He continued running and finished last among the 57 competitors who completed the race (75 had started). Akhwari dragged his bandaged and bloody legs to the finish line over an hour after the winner had crossed it. That did not prevent the few thousand people left in the stadium from cheering his effort. When interviewed later and asked why he continued the race, he said, "My country did not send me 10,000 miles just to start the race; they sent me to finish the race."³

Judy Guinness, Fencing, Los Angeles 1932- Judy Guinness was about to become the first ever Briton to win fencing gold at the age of 21. After a closely contested final against Austrian Ellen Preis, Guinness was declared the winner by the judges and would have been awarded the gold. However, Guinness pointed out to them that they had missed two hits by her opponent. Guinness' honesty cost her the gold medal.⁴

These stories tell us that teamwork, perseverance, honesty and other human virtues lie at the heart of competitions at the Olympics. Boxing great and former Olympic gold medal winner Muhammad Ali sums it all up when he said that “the will must be stronger than the skill.” In the games of the 2012 Olympics in London, dozens of gold medals will be won. However, stories of character and the triumph of the human spirit are those that will endure and will continue to inspire not just athletes but all of humanity.

¹Ripples previously featured other stories on Olympic values and character in its September 2008 issue.

²Ron Flatter, Three-Peaking wasn't enough for Oerter, <http://espn.go.com/sportscentury/features/00016388.html>

³http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Stephen_Akhwari

⁴Max Davidson, The Ten Most Sporting Gestures, The Guardian, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/sport/2009/mar/29/10-sporting-gestures>