The Heart of a Champion

Inspiring True Stories of Challenge and Triumph

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Revell

a division of Baker Publishing Group
Grand Rapids, Michigan
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A PHILOSOPHY FOR WINNING

We all want to win. We want to go to the top. We’ve all got great aspirations, great goals. I’d like to think with you about what I believe to be the ingredients of a winning philosophy, about some great champions I’ve known in the world of sports who have personified what I think it takes to win. There are certain basic qualities and characteristics you’ve got to have. Number one: you’ve got to have a will to win.

I suppose you have all heard this cliché over and over again. It’s a phrase used more in sports than elsewhere, and probably used more there than any other statement. The will to win. The will to win! As I’ve analyzed great champions I’m convinced that this is the something that makes the difference between mediocre athletes and great performers in the world of sports. It depends upon whether
or not you’ve got this something deep down inside—this will to win.

It’s a will to win, and not just a wish to win. I know a lot of people who have what I would call a wish to win. They’d like to go to the top. They daydream about the position they’d like to hold in life. I’ve seen it in sports. I’ve seen fellows in locker rooms sitting around dreaming on the benches; you talk to them about their performances, and they’ve got great dreams about what they’d like to be. They tell you their potential, about the heights they could soar to, or the distances they could run, the times they could perform if they would only get out and train and work and do the thing necessary to bring it to pass.

And you find them three or four years later still talking about what they could do if they would only pay the price. Well, it isn’t that kind of thinking that takes you to the top. Wishful thinking, or daydreaming, is the kind of escapism that will destroy many a man’s greatest aspiration.

Now, I don’t mean you dare not dream at all. I think the greatest thing in life is to be able to dream, to have great aspirations, but I think it equally important that you have a will that can turn that dream into reality. You’ve got to have something within you that is able to translate into concrete practice the idea in the back of your mind.

You’ve got to dream, yes, but more importantly you’ve got to have a will that makes that thing come to pass. Let me illustrate by referring to one of my great friends, Dr. Roger Bannister. I don’t know how many of you have heard of him. He was the man who astounded the track-and-field world by running the mile in less than four minutes—the first miler in history to do it. If you know anything about run-
ning, you know it was a fantastic accomplishment. When I picked up the newspaper and read the headline, “Bannister runs mile in under four minutes,” I was flabbergasted.

Oh, I’d seen Bannister run, many times. I’ve seen a lot of great stars run, but I didn’t believe anyone would be able to run a four-minute mile for the next twenty years. When I went to Asia recently, I stopped off in London, went out to St. Mary’s Hospital and had a talk with Roger about this tremendous feat.

I wish you could hear him describe it. He’s the most eloquent describer of what it takes to run that I’ve ever heard. Having lunch there together, during the week he was finishing his internship at St. Mary’s Hospital, we began to talk about how he did it. He told me that in the Olympic Games in 1952, he was terribly disappointed—he was supposed to win, but he wound up in fourth place. He came home more or less chagrined and disillusioned, and he was going to give up running. His medical studies were so demanding that he thought he’d better devote all of his time to preparing for medicine and forget about running.

So he went to his coach and he told him; he said, “Coach, I’m through. I’m going to devote all my time to studying.” His coach said, “Roger, I think you are the man who can break four minutes in the mile. I wish you’d give it one last try before you quit.”

Roger didn’t know what to say, but he went home that night and even as he was studying anatomy, with a pencil in his hand, he began to think about whether or not he might be able to do this thing. Before that night was over, there had crystallized in his mind, in the form of iron will,
the determination that before he quit running he was going to try to crack the four-minute mile.

He knew what it meant. He knew he would have to study eight, nine, ten hours a day to get through medical school. He knew he would have to train four hours a day. He would have to run continually to build his body up to the peak of perfection. He knew he would have to eat the best foods. He knew he would have to go to bed early every night and sleep nine or ten hours to let his body recuperate and build up for that great day. Willing to do that, willing to pay the price, for five solid months he went through a routine just like that. And then the day came for him to try for the four-minute mile.

He told me of how he stepped out of the locker room on a cold, blustery day. There was a sharp wind blowing, and as he walked out on the track he could tell that it was going to be slow because five hours of rain in the morning had dampened it. There were very few people in the stands. He talked to his buddies, Chris Brasher and Chris Chataway, after warming up and said, “I’m going to try for the four-minute mile today.” They said, “OK, Roger, we’ll set the pace for you. We’ll do everything we can to bring you in.” They shook hands, wished each other luck, and they got down to the mark. The gun went off. Brasher forged out in front, and they started off on the historic race.

Brasher moved out easily and hit the first lap right on pace—57.5 seconds. He had to push hard to maintain the pace because the track was slow, and they hit the second lap in 1:58.2—right on pace. They went into that third lap, the hardest one of all when you’re tired and fatigued and when you want to let down. But Chataway
now moved into the lead to force the pace, and Roger stayed with him.

They hit the end of the third lap, and of course on that wet track they were both tired. But the time—3:00.5! They were on the way to the four-minute mile for the first time in history.

Roger told me about that moment: “Bob, I don’t believe I’ve ever been so tired. My step began to falter and I felt dead and all of a sudden my head was throbbing and my lungs were bursting and I thought to myself, ‘Well, maybe what I’d better do is slacken the pace and just come in to win.’” He started to slow down for a moment as Chataway began to slow; and he described it: “I can’t understand it, and I can’t communicate it to you, but all of a sudden something welled up within me and it said, ‘Roger, if you run until you collapse on that track you’re going to make this four-minute mile. If your knees hit the track, you’re going to give everything you’ve got, you’re going to do it; you know you can. For five months you’ve trained. You can do it.’”

And so instead of slackening the pace, and with that will crystallizing itself, fighting off the pain, he picked up those knees and began to sprint. He went by Chataway, tore around the curve, and possessed with the madness that only the great ones have, he began to drive with all he had down the backstretch. He let those legs go out, numb and tired, but he let them go. As he hit the last curve his stride began to break again. Describing the feeling he had as he came off the curve, he said, “Bob, I just felt like there was an eternity between the end of that curve and that tape, fifty yards away. But I just closed my eyes and gritted my
teeth and forced myself to hold stride, and I went pounding on down that stretch.”

He opened his eyes periodically and just before he went into the tape he opened them wide, took that one last step and collapsed in the arms of his manager-coach. The time: 3:59.4! He had done it.

Oh, you can talk about a lot of things involved here. You can talk about the work, the discipline, you can talk about the determination—but beyond all that, there is something down deep in the human heart that you cannot analyze, that you can’t pour into a test tube. You can’t look at it through a microscope, but it’s there—the will to win, the will to accomplish. It’s what drove him through those long, tedious strides to the accomplishment that the world is still talking about.

May I tell you about someone else who to me is the greatest all-around athlete I think the world has ever produced? I know you will be astounded when I tell you that I think the greatest athlete of all time is not a man. It’s a woman. Babe Didrikson Zaharias. Before you disagree with me, I wish you’d read her life story as it appeared in the *Saturday Evening Post*. This girl was born in Texas in obscure poverty. She resolved that somehow she was going to be great in sports. From the first time she picked up a bat or shot a basketball, she loved sports, and she gave her whole life to them. She had the kind of will that really makes champions. I’m told by her coach that one day he told her that the javelin record was such-and-such a throw. She had never thrown a javelin before but, typical of the Babe’s whole mental attitude and philosophy, she picked up that javelin and she went out there and almost broke her
back in the process. But she bettered the American javelin throw record on her first throw! Have you read her record? All-American in softball. All-American in basketball. Great in swimming. Great in tennis. Great in horseback riding, in archery. She won the national championship in track and field all by herself, winning five first places. She went to the Olympic Games in 1932, and I want to tell you how she trained. She didn't have any training facilities of her own, so she asked her neighbors if she could run through their backyards. And running through their backyards and jumping over the shrubbery, she trained for the hurdles in the 1932 games—and won the gold medal in Los Angeles.

She went on to win another gold medal in the javelin throw. After becoming a star in track and field she went into golf, and she won the National Open championship again and again, breaking all kinds of records for women in golf.

But at the crowning point of her athletic career, with glory and honor hers and having broken every record that it is possible for a woman to break, she was told by her doctor that she had cancer so badly that she'd probably not live through the operation. Can you imagine what a moment like that would be like, at the height of your career, young, strong, famous, to be told that you had cancer and that you were going to die?

The Babe went into that just as she went into everything else, with the will to win, breathing a prayer in her heart that God would help her. With that courage of soul, that determination, that something that no one can describe, she went into that experience, she emerged, she was alive. She was grateful to God for her life, and a year and a half
later, still recuperating, still weak, she came back to win the National Open golf championship once again. Then she went through a second cancer operation. She came back again to play great golf. She had the greatest asset of human life, a will to win, a will to conquer, a will to go to the top. It’s the most important thing you can have, and it’s amazing how it can lead people through the most stringent kinds of difficulty.

Secondly, if you’re going to be great in sports you’ve got to have something else. You’ve got to have inspiration. You think I’m talking in the abstract? What is inspiration? How I wish I could tell you. How I wish I knew what inspiration is. If I did, I would be the greatest psychologist the world has ever known, because even those people who rely upon inspiration most can’t tell you what it is. The poets, the artists, the musicians—they don’t know what it is. But we can all see it. I’ve been amazed to see mediocre athletes, fellows drifting along with great potential but never really realizing their full abilities, suddenly inspired by a great coach, or by some great ideal or a sweetheart—something would lift them up and they would do the impossible. In a matter of a few months they would become sensational, and people would wonder what had happened.

I can’t describe it or define it, but I’d like to give you one facet of what I think it means when people are inspired. *It’s when they see themselves not as they are but as they can become.* It’s when they see themselves, not in terms of their weaknesses and shortcomings, their failures and inadequacies, but in terms of what they can be, when they begin to believe they can be what their vision tells them—that’s when they’re inspired. When they no longer
see their weaknesses, but their greatnesses, by emphasizing their strengths they go on to do things they never dreamed of.

May I tell you the greatest story I know of in sports? It will sound unbelievable to you, and I tremble as I tell it, because I know the thing is true. It is a story that goes all the way back to 1920 and to the personality of a fellow by the name of Charley Paddock. I have read his life story and I know how that as a boy Charley had one great burning ambition—to be an Olympic champion. It was the one thing that dominated his thinking, even as a boy.

He went up to his coach one day and said, “Coach, what can I do to become the world’s fastest sprinter? What’s the secret of sprinting?” His coach replied, “You’ve got to get your knees high.” The secret of sprinting is to pick those knees up and lean forward and reach out. The runners who really sprint are those who get those knees high and drive them like pistons.

Well, Charley Paddock worked on it. He worked on it until he got his knees coming up so high that his thighs hit his chest. And the sports writers tell me that whenever Charley Paddock would start down the track he was a slow starter, but pretty soon those knees would begin pumping and all you could see was just a blur of knees as he would tear down to that finish line. The last five or six yards he would leap off the track, fly through the air, knees still pumping in midair, to hit the tape. He set or tied world’s record upon world’s record, holding four world’s records at one time. In 1920, flying through the air to hit the tape the winner, he claimed the dream of his lifetime when he won the 100 meters in the Olympic Games at Antwerp,
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Belgium. He came back home. His inspiration had led him to the heights.

Charley Paddock was a great speaker. He loved to talk with young people. He had one great theme: “If you think you can, you can. If you believe a thing strongly enough, it can come to pass in your life.” He was speaking once at East Tech High School in Cleveland, Ohio; he gave a great talk and afterwards he lifted up his hand and said to a thousand high school students, “Who knows but there’s an Olympic champion right here in this auditorium this afternoon?” When he finished his speech, a number of young kids came up to talk with him; there was one little spindly-legged boy so touched by what Charley had said that he could hardly talk. His lips were quivering when he came up to Paddock and said, “Gee, Mr. Paddock, I’d give anything if I could be an Olympic champion just like you.” Charley reached out and, putting his hand on his shoulder, said, “Young fellow, that’s what I wanted to be when I was a little bit younger than you. If you’ll work for it, if you’ll train, you can become an Olympic champion.”

It was the moment of inspiration. That boy was different. Just last week I gave a speech in a high school where a teacher told me that she watched that boy, night after night as he went out, off season and during season, as he ran and ran and trained and trained. In 1936 that little spindly-legged boy, although no longer spindly-legged, went to Berlin, Germany. He won four gold medals. His name is Jesse Owens. Charley Paddock had inspired him; after setting three world’s records one afternoon in 1935, he won the 100 meters, the 200 meters, the broad jump, and led off the 400-meter relay team.
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But the story doesn’t end there. Jesse Owens came back home to Cleveland, Ohio, and as he drove down the street in a great big convertible, the crowds cheered him wildly. He was at the height of his glory; every now and then the big car would stop and he would sign an autograph for a boy. Believe it or not, there was another skinny-legged boy who came up to the side of the car, and putting his hands on the door, said, “Gee, Mr. Owens, I’d give anything if I could be an Olympic champion just like you.”

Jesse told me the story himself. This little boy was so skinny that all his friends called him “Bones.” Jesse reached out and put his hand on the boy’s hand as he said, “You know, young fellow, that’s what I wanted to be when I was a little older than you are. If you’ll work and train and believe you can, you can become an Olympic champion.” Well, that little boy was so inspired he ran all the way home. He didn’t stop. Nine years of age. Little old skinny legs. Maybe with his knees knocking. But he ran all the way home and ran up to his grandmother and said, “Grandma, I’m going to be an Olympic champion.”

I was at Wembley Stadium in London, England, for the Olympic games of 1948—with 110,000 other people—as the crowd hushed, and as the boys down there, six of them, got set for the 100-meter finals. The gun went off. The boy in the outside lane burst out, drove down the track and hit the tape, the winner. His name, Harrison “Bones” Dillard; he tied Jesse Owens’s Olympic record of 10.3. He later went on to hold the world’s record in the hurdles. I saw him skim over the hurdles in 1952 in Helsinki in 13.7, to set a new Olympic record. I saw him better one of Jesse Owens’s world’s records in Salt Lake City, Utah, in the 220-yard low hurdles.
You say it’s fantastic? You’re saying that it’ll never happen again? And I tell you, you’re wrong. It’ll happen again and again, in boys and girls who are inspired, in young men and women who will catch a vision of what they can become, who will see not skinny legs or spindly legs, but who will catch a vision of Olympic champions. They will rise through training and perseverance and hard work and they’ll become champions—they’ll break world’s records and they’ll shatter the marks.

You show me someone who has no inspiration, and I’ll show you someone as good as dead. Show me someone with no challenges, no goals, no great aspirations, and I’ll show you someone who won’t do anything in life. You’ve got to be inspired. Let some great thing pull you up. In living let some great goal, some great ideal, a great coach, some lovely wife, a husband, some sweetheart or friend, a teacher, a minister, let Almighty God inspire you and lift you up to catch a vision of what you can be.

You know, one reason why I think a great deal of Jesus is because, for one thing, He never pointed out the weaknesses of people, never dwelt on their failures and their shortcomings. He always thought of the dream that God had for their lives. Never emphasizing their failures, He simply said, “Go and sin no more. Be what God intends you to be.” Lifting people up to catch a vision of what they could be, He changed human life. That’s why I think He’s the greatest inspiration that has ever hit the human race. Inspiration is vital to greatness in living.

Another point, and this may sound strange to you—do your level best no matter what. This may sound like a contradiction in terms, after what I’ve just said, but would
I surprise you if I told you that some of the greatest champions I’ve known are guys and girls who never won a gold medal? They were people who, even though they didn’t win in the sense of living up to the highest within them, yet they did their best and overshadowed some of those who won the gold medals.

Would I surprise you if I told you that the greatest runner I’ve ever known, pound for pound, is a little Irishman from Illinois, 116 pounds of solid heart and muscle, 5 feet 3½ inches tall? His name is Johnny Twomey. They used to call him “The Flying Splinter.” I’ve seen that little guy running in races with taller men whose elbows would hit him in the head as he was going around the track. He was that small. But he never gave quarter, and he never asked for quarter. I’ve seen him push many to record upon record. I’ve seen others staggering to beat him, as he went on, head held high no matter what place he took.

I saw him in a Chicago Daily News meet a few years ago, in a two-mile race, on a board track, with 22 laps to go. The field started off. At the end of half a lap, his shoe came off. Well, if you know anything about indoor running, on a track that’s made mostly of splinters, you know that you just can’t go on after that happens!

Everyone thought Johnny was out of the race, and a sigh went over the whole stadium. But do you suppose that little guy would quit? Not on your life. One hundred and sixteen pounds of throbbing heart, he kept right on running; absorbing the splinters, he moved up into the pack. At the end of 20 laps he moved out in front, and at the end of 21 laps it looked like he was a sure winner, when a boy from Oklahoma by the name of Forest Efaw, about 6 feet
2 inches tall, began to move up behind him. Talk about Mutt and Jeff on the track—this was it! Forest was making up the range at about eight feet to Johnny’s three or four, and as they went into the last lap, he was catching Johnny. Johnny gave everything he had. Forest barely caught him at the tape and surged out in front to beat him by a foot.

Forest Efaw took home the gold medal, but Johnny Twomey took home a heart that was solid gold. I believe, in terms of my own experience, that that kind of thing is sometimes even greater than winning. I would much rather be known as a person who did his level best no matter what, than to claim all the victories and all the records, never having quite fulfilled the destiny that I knew God had for my life.

May I tell you another story? I made a speech in Toronto, Canada, and after I finished speaking, a young boy came up to me. I’ll never forget him. He put his right hand up on my left shoulder and said, “Mr. Richards, I know what you mean when you say you can take defeat and bounce back to victory.” I’d been emphasizing that sometimes defeats are the substance out of which great victories are made. You’ve got to learn to take them and keep on going. Then he said, “I had to take a great defeat in my life, and I know you can bounce back and keep going.” Well, I was quite naïve and superficial; I put my hand on his and said, “Well, thanks, young fellow, I’m glad to hear you say that,” and I patted his hand and turned away, and he walked away. I don’t know what it was—some compulsion within me said, “Bob, you’ve got to turn and look at that boy,” and I turned and looked and then it was I realized what it was he was talking about. The left sleeve of his red jacket was
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dangling loosely; his arm had been cut off at the shoulder, I learned later, in an automobile wreck. And when I saw that boy walking away, I thought, That guy knows so much more how to take defeat than you ever will. I started after him, to tell him that I understood what he meant, when George Duthie, the sports director of Canada, nudged me and said, “Bob, you know that that boy who just spoke to you won second place in the ten-mile swim in the Canadian championships yesterday.”

I don’t even know his name. I dare say that if you looked in all the record books you’d never find his name there, but he’s the greatest swimmer I’ve ever known. With that one arm, doing his level best, reaching out through a ten-mile swim, barely being nudged out, he took home not only the silver medal, but something infinitely greater: he took home character, he took home courage, he took home a winning personality.

I don’t think you really win until you live up to that high thing within you that says, “Do your best, no matter what.” Grantland Rice once wrote:

When the One Great Scorer comes to write
against your name—
He marks—not that you won or lost—but how you played the game.

That’s why I think the Olympic slogan is so tremendous. The glory of the Olympic Games is not in the victory but in taking part. The essential thing in life is not conquering, but fighting well. This doesn’t mean you won’t conquer. It doesn’t mean you won’t find victory. It means that when you do your best, you find the deepest kind of conquering,
the deepest kind of victory. Do your best no matter what, and you’ve found the real secret of winning.

And lastly, take God with you. It’s amazing to me, the number of great champions I know who tell me that they pray. They ask God for strength. I was in the national decathlon championship, and after finishing up the ten events, tired and worn out, all of us were walking off the field and one boy, Joel Shankle, national collegiate broad jump champion from Duke University, came up to me. He put his arm around me. We were all tired. He said, “Bob, I want you to know this. I pray as much as you do. I always call on God for strength and health.”

Everywhere you go, in sports, you find men like that. I was in Mexico City for the Pan-American games, and I saw a boy who said to a sports writer just before the games began, “With God’s help, I’m going to set a new world’s record this year.” His name was Lou Jones. Nobody gave him much of a chance. He hadn’t run a very fast time. But he believed it—with God’s help he was going to break the world’s record. He got down to his mark. The gun went off and Lou Jones and Jimmy Lea and J. W. Mashburn tore out of their blocks. I’ve never seen a race like this in my life. They blistered that track, around the curve, down the backstretch. The altitude there was 7,500 feet. And as they came off the curve you could see the effects of running so fast in such an altitude; the boys began to pale. You could see them gasping for air, but there was not one break in stride. There wasn’t half a yard between the three of them.

Lou, sprinting like mad, Jimmy right behind him, and J. W. Mashburn right with Jimmy: they were driving down
the straightaway for the last 20 yards, and you could just see the oxygen leaving them, but they held the stride and went into the tape. Lou reached out, hit the tape just in front of Jimmy Lea and J. W. Mashburn and collapsed unconscious on the track.

For forty-five minutes they gave that boy oxygen as he struggled back to normal. But his time, 45.4 seconds, was a new world’s record in the 400-meter dash. When he finally got up they took him across the field, and I went over and put my arm around him and said, “Lou, it was splendid. I’ve never seen anything like it.” He put his hand up on my shoulder and said, “Bob, I want to praise God for helping me run that race.” He’d been praying all the way around the track.

I could tell you of others. Alvin Dark of the Chicago Cubs tells me he never goes out on the field without taking God with him. Doak Walker, Otto Graham, Don Moomaw, great all-Americans, great professional football players: they say humbly, “Every time I step on the field I pray that God will help me to do my best.” Carl Erskine, Jackie Robinson, many great stars—all have found this same thing. I think that there is a great truth in the biblical statement that says: “They that wait upon the LORD shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run, and not be weary; and they shall walk, and not faint” (Isa. 40:31). It’s a great thing in life. Those happy people, those people who accomplish, those people of faith, have a deep religious philosophy. They believe that their lives are undergirded with a power greater than their own. They believe that there is a destiny for their lives. Nothing can thwart them. With God they do great and tremendous things.
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So I’d like to urge you—in your work, in your business, in your home—to take God with you; here is a power that can help you reach the heights. It’s the greatest ingredient in what I call a winning philosophy. These are the secrets: First, dream great dreams; have a will that translates those dreams into reality, have a will to win. Secondly, let something inspire you, some great goal, some cause, some great challenge; let something or someone inspire you to see yourself, not for what you are, but for what you can become. Do your level best, no matter what. Run the race with the greatest that is within you. Live up to the highest that you have. Do what God has set you to do. And lastly, take God with you. And you know that you’ll win and conquer and triumph in life.