

Pole-Vaulting Disciples  
By  
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When I think about what a Disciple looks like, I am reminded of a visit I made to my high school track coach nearly a year after graduation. This visit brought about a new perspective for me with respect to discipleship, and provided me with a concrete image of what a Disciple looks like: a high school pole-vaulter.

I meandered down the steps to my high school football field. Nearly a year had passed since I had looked from that vantage point into the eyes of the students, and I felt more than slightly out of place. Track season had begun. Ponytails bobbed up and down as pre-adolescent teenagers trained for the 400 meter relays, each girl praying that the track meet next Thursday would find her victorious. One girl was chattering on her cell phone, while the others chastised her for not working hard enough.

Walking around the crowded field, attempting to keep my shoes from becoming soiled by the excess mud that had accumulated since the most recent rain, I heard a whistle. Suddenly, there were several shrill whistles following in quick succession. I snapped my head back to see four lanky youths galloping past me. They stopped at the start-finish line, and doubled over to catch their breaths. Following the sound of the whistles, I turned to the pole-vault pit.

A body was hurtled into the air. Sailing over the bar into the pit, there he was: the star pole-vaulter of Franklin County. He pulled his body up from the mat and slunk back to the runway, from whence he would soon take his next jump. Pole in hand, sweat pouring from his

Jessica Elaine Synan

“What does a Disciple look like?”

Page 2

body, he listened to his coach tell him the reasons that he only jumped fifteen feet, instead of fifteen-six.

“Get your legs up!”

“You’re trying to compensate for a lack of momentum.”

“Arch your back.”

“It’s in your hips.”

Coach clapped his hands in a pair of crisp eighth-notes, and repeated the sequence, “You need to run like this.”

“Back up a halfa-step next time and make your take-off smoother.”

He abruptly turned his attention away from the pole-vaulters to acknowledge my presence, “How are you?”

We talked about life, college, and his scrawny, youthful track team. Then he began that shrill whistle again, “Shotgun. *Shotgun!* Are you ready?” I squinted to distinguish the four runners from the start-finish line now at the 300 meter line, awaiting their coach’s command for their next sprint.

“Yeah, Coach!”

“Go!”

As the boys rounded the “dark corner” of the track behind the high-jump, the whistling resumed. Coach was telling them to run faster; try harder. I just covered my ears and watched in

Jessica Elaine Synan

“What does a Disciple look like?”

amazement. He looked around, flipping pages on his clipboard and clicking split times on his stopwatch. I don't think he even remembered that I was there.

My head was spinning. There were so many guys, and he was coaching them all. Six or seven appeared out of nowhere, and Coach asked them how many sprints they had left to run.

"Two," shouted one.

Coach asked another, and whispered to me, "This one's gonna tell me the truth."

"Four, Coach."

"Well, get going!" Coach's voice was getting gravelly. He must have been yelling at those boys for more than an hour.

I inquired, "So, do any of these guys know what they're doing?"

"Nah," he replied nonchalantly and recommenced his whistling.

I could see the look of determination in his eyes as he told the next group to start their sprint, "Go!"

I remembered the history of the Franklin County track team during the years I was a student there. Every now and then, an exceptional sprinter would come through, even less often would appear a state champion shot put or discus thrower; yet somehow, every year, out of Franklin County would emerge a new talent in the pole-vault competition.

Coach poured his heart and soul into the vaulters, and they in turn spent hours upon hours in preparation for competition. They would practice in the frigid air of January, even during the pre-season when Coach wasn't allowed to supervise their training. He often recruited eighth

Jessica Elaine Synan

“What does a Disciple look like?”

Page 4

graders to the pit— sometimes snatching them away from careers as mediocre sprinters or distance runners— teaching them the fundamentals long before they had even the most remote chance of being competitive. Coach loved the pole-vaulters; they were the reason he coached.

He looked back to the pole-vault pit in time to see one of his star vaulters plummet to the ground, crashing through the bar set at fourteen feet, flinging his pole down in disgust. Scratching his head, Coach listened as the boy spouted off an expletive, and he gingerly began to speak, “You have to see your feet on the other side of the bar. Everything was fine until you dropped your hips. Try it again.”

The boy didn’t complain. Instead, I saw impervious dedication peeking through his “tough-guy” façade. He really wanted to be the best, and he was going to do everything in his power to make sure that next time Coach would have one less thing to critique.

Looking back, I realize that Disciples of Christ often look a lot like skinny high school pole-vaulters. Disciples aren’t always attractive. They don’t always succeed in following the commands of their God. Sometimes, they need to hear someone tell them, “Go!” They rarely know exactly what they are doing and less often know how to do what they think they should do. They don’t waste all their time trying to catch their breath after a tough situation; they get busy readying themselves for the next sprint.

True Disciples are willing to listen when God tells them they need to change. They are determined to give life their best shot. Disciples want to please God, so even when they ruin an

Jessica Elaine Synan  
“What does a Disciple look like?”  
Page 5

attempt at holiness, they pick themselves up from the ground and determine that next time, they *will* please him.