

Run the straight race: 1 Corinthians 9.19-27

1 Corinthians 9. 1-18: Run the straight race, ...

Rod Hill asks: I wonder if you can work out who any of the people are in this photograph?

Yes, one is me and another is Lord Coe (as he now is – Seb Coe as he was then). Believe it or not there was a stage in my life when I was a reasonably good athlete. Both Seb and I were members of the City of Sheffield Schools Cross Country team and there was even one famous occasion on which I beat him in one of the schools league races – but only one.

I was a member of Sheffield United Harriers and trained every Tuesday evening and every Sunday morning in Hillsborough Park, along with a number of other athletes. Seb, on the other hand, was a member of Hallamshire Harriers, who trained somewhere else in the city, at one of the other stadiums. But I know that he trained far more often than I did because, from time to time, I would see him pounding the streets of Sheffield in the dark or the rain. What a sense of discipline and devotion he must have had.

Of course, Seb went on to athletics stardom, whereas my athletics prowess somehow faded away once university and women and such like came along. I just didn't have the 'stickability' that Coe had – out pounding the roads twice most days, or at the track. I'm sure that there was also a question of innate natural ability, temperament, body type etc., but there is no doubt in my mind that the tenacity to stick at it through thick and thin had a large part to play in why Seb Coe broke World and Olympic Records and I never did.

Do I regret not sticking at it? No, not really, God had other important things for my life. But I think I learned a lesson about the benefits of training hard if you're to win the race, whether that's a cross country race or something else that God puts in front of us.

Paul uses that image in today's passage. "Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training . they do it to get a crown..."(v19) "but we do it to get a crown that will last for ever.

Seb Coe had a much more disciplined approach to his athletics than I ever did, no wonder that he succeeded. Paul is suggesting that Christians, as well as athletes, benefit from a disciplined approach. We need a disciplined approach to prayer, the study of scriptures etc. and that's partly why I have always shared my morning prayers with the congregations that I have had pastoral charge of, it keeps me disciplined. It's part of the reason why I like writing these thoughts for the day. At least a couple of times a week now, once for this and once for preparation for Sunday worship, I have to turn to the commentaries and really study what the scriptures are saying. Not a bad thing to have self-discipline in the spiritual life – "I commend it to the house", as they say!

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