

Going the Distance (Excellence - Chapter 8)

n/a

Ready:

"Though a righteous man falls seven times, he will get up, but the wicked will stumble into ruin." —Proverbs 24:16

"Nothing in this world can take the place of persistence. Talent will not; nothing is more common than unsuccessful people with talent. Genius will not; unrewarded genius is almost a proverb. Education will not; the world is full of educated derelicts. Persistence and determination alone are omnipotent. The slogan "press on" has solved and always will solve the problems of the human race." —Calvin Coolidge

Set

To hear Ryan Hall nonchalantly describe his winding journey as a long-distance runner isn't much different from watching him glide with apparent ease through treacherous hills and valleys en route to the finish line. But just because he makes it look effortless doesn't mean his path to competitive greatness has been without a fair number of trials and tribulations.

"I've had a really rocky journey," Hall says. "The hardest thing is picking yourself up after a shattered dream or an injury or when you know you didn't give your best."

Born in Kirkland, Washington, and a resident of Big Bear Lake, California, since the age of five, Hall first became interested in running when he was in the eighth grade. He grew up in a Christian home as the third of five children. But even though his parents did their best to instill godly principles into his life, he admits heading the wrong way as a teenager while pursuing traditional sports such as baseball, basketball and football—a lifestyle that found him in the middle of the cool crowd and an increasingly active party scene.

"We were young, so we weren't into drinking and drugs, but it was heading that direction," Hall says. "But when I started running, my lifestyle changed a lot. I lost a lot of those friends. So I was around a whole different group of people. That put me out of the cool group. I remember just feeling a void at that point and a little bit lonely. Socially I wasn't fitting in anymore. I was kind of struggling with that. Jesus really became my best friend at that point. When I was feeling that void, I would go to Him for that relationship that I was looking for and that was the real beginning of my walk with Christ—and it's been growing ever since."

Hall's development as a long-distance runner was slow and steady, but by his junior year, the hard work finally began to pay off. He claimed the California State cross country title as a junior and senior and won state titles in the two-mile as a junior and in the 1600-meter as a senior. Hall also finished third at the Footlocker Nationals in Orlando.

That success drew the attention of Stanford University, home of one of the nation's premier cross country and track programs. After a solid freshman year, Hall's next two seasons at Stanford were hindered by injuries. Discouraged by his physical health and overall performance up to that point, he decided that he needed to rethink his priorities and took a leave of absence from the team.

"I went through a really rough patch during my sophomore year at Stanford where I actually went home for a quarter and needed to just figure out if that's where God called me to be," Hall says. "I was really questioning whether He wanted me there or not. I was struggling with my identity. While I was a Christian and my faith was really important to me, my worth was coming from my athletic performances. If I wasn't running well, I didn't have a good view of myself. I had to go back home and figure out where I was supposed to be and my identity and my value. That's when I really made the shift."

With a renewed sense of purpose, Hall returned to Stanford and led his team to the 2003 NCAA Cross-Country Championship with a second-place finish, and he was named All-American for a second straight season. As a senior, he won the pre-nationals in Terre Haute, Indiana, and won the 5000-meter title at the NCAA track and field championships. Following his collegiate career, Hall continued to compete professionally, including a successful European stint in 2006. Although he had tinkered with longer distances before, it wasn't until he returned home from Europe that he started to consider making the switch from the middle distances in which he had excelled to marathon distances.

"With the Olympics around the corner, I was trying to figure out what I was best suited to run," Hall says. "Then I took a good, honest look at myself and realized I probably wasn't going to develop a whole lot more in terms of speed. I was trying to figure out how God made me and what event best suits me. That's when I turned my attention to the marathon."

Ironically, Hall remembers a time when even the 10K was an unpleasant chore. After running the event at the cross-country nationals his sophomore year at Stanford, he told his father how much he hated the distance and didn't want to run it again. "That's because I wasn't strong enough, and I didn't have enough endurance for that race," Hall explains. "It's funny that I'm doing marathons now. I would have never thought I would run marathons at this young of an age. I didn't see it as my premier event growing up and through college. That's just a good example of how we're able to grow more than we think or could imagine in the area of endurance when we challenge ourselves."

Hall says there has been a stereotype within the U.S. that the marathon is something runners do at the end of their career, when they are no longer competitive on the track. Long gone are the days of Alberto Salazar and Frank Shorter. But Hall says he is part of a burgeoning movement among younger competitors looking to put the event back on the map here in America.

Hall took a huge leap in accomplishing that goal with his very first marathon on April 22, 2007—the Flora London Marathon—where he finished seventh in a time of 2:08:24 and set a

record for American-born citizens. In his second marathon on November 3, 2007, he qualified for the 2008 U.S. Olympic team by winning the Team Trials. He followed that up on April 13, 2008, at the Flora London Marathon by breaking his own American-born record with a fifth-place finish in a time of 2:06:17. At the 2008 Summer Olympics in Beijing, China, Hall finished an impressive tenth place amid the world's elite marathoners.

Throughout his career, Hall has found inspiration in a friendship with legendary runner Jim Ryun and his family. He is also a big fan of Scottish Olympian Eric Liddell, whose story was told in the film *Chariots of Fire*. But Hall's greatest source of strength comes from God's Word. One of his favorite passages is 2 Chronicles 16:9, which says, *"For the eyes of the Lord move to and fro throughout the earth that He may strongly support those whose heart is completely His"* (NASB). "That verse challenges me like no other verse in the Bible," Hall says. "It's asking where my heart is at every moment of every day. Is my heart completely His? That's what I'm striving for in my daily life."

As Hall's relationship with Jesus has grown, so has his understanding of excellence. Part of his early struggles as a runner were based on the identity crisis that often takes place for those sports competitors who have highly measurable templates for success.

"The world's definition of excellence is just based on performance," Hall says. "As soon as you're not performing, no one wants to talk to you anymore in the media, and it's easy to get down on yourself. It's all wrapped up in performance. It's like building your house on the sand. It's very changing and fleeting, and eventually it's going to be gone, because no one is always on top of their game.

"But when you find your identity in Christ and in what He's done for you, it's the unchanging, sturdy rock that you can always stand on," he continues. "You can have a much healthier perspective on yourself and in life in general and in where your hope lies. When I'm not performing well, I lose my hope. I lose my joy. I get down. I get depressed. But when you find your identity in Christ, that's unchanging. No matter what you do, you can't mess that up."

Another one of Hall's favorite Bible verses is found in the commonly quoted Philippians 4:13: *"I am able to do all things through Him who strengthens me."* But instead of resting solely on that promise, he prefers to back it up with Philippians 4:12—a lesser-known Scripture that adds greater context: *"I know both how to have a little, and I know how to have a lot. In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret [of being content]—whether wellfed or hungry, whether in abundance or in need."*

For Hall, the aspect of contentment is a foundational key to excellence, because it opens the door to endurance and a never-give-up attitude. "After my performance in London, I was on a huge high; and then I took a break, and I came back and started my training again—and all of the sudden I'm back at ground zero," Hall says. "At that point, I was unfit, and it's not fun to be unfit. I'm used to feeling really good and I'm used to just flying along; but when I start back up after taking some time off, I'm sluggish and not very fit, and it's easy to get negative and unthankful. That verse inspires me to have that attitude of gratitude, which is so important for enduring life, enduring hard patches of racing, enduring a hard season where things don't pan out the way you want."

According to Hall, an unthankful heart is just one of many hindrances to endurance and, therefore, excellence. Others that he has personally faced include doubt and unbelief. He also cites the body as an obstacle to endurance—especially for those who struggle with physical

discipline. But for all of these challenges, Hall relies unequivocally on his relationship with God.

“The Bible is the best sports psychology in the world,” he says. “It’s truth and it applies to every aspect of our lives. The more grounded I am in that and the more truth I have flowing in me, the less often I lose hope and get down and go through those tough times.”

Of course, applying these principles to one’s life requires a great amount of discipline in all areas of life—training, nutrition, mental toughness and spiritual upkeep. It also requires something else that is often overlooked but will nonetheless make or break any athlete: rest and recovery. Hall, for instance, trains hard for three months and then backs off the last three weeks leading up to a race.

“That’s huge,” he says. “When you look at things in cycles, there is a season for everything. There have been times when I was at the end of the season and I was really excited about the way things had gone, so I just kept going and didn’t take a break. That would totally come back to bite me.”

Hall equates an athlete’s need for rest and recovery to the Old Testament principle of land conservation through furloughs. In Leviticus 25:2-4, God tells the Israelites to plant and harvest their fields and vineyards for six years but then to rest the land in the seventh year as “*a Sabbath to the LORD*.” The rest and recovery phase of endurance was confirmed by Jesus in Matthew 11:28, where He says, “*Come to Me, all of you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.*”

“That just seems like a principle that God has set since the beginning of time when He took a break on the seventh day,” Hall says. “Our bodies are just geared toward work and then recovery. You can’t skimp on that recovery time; otherwise, your body won’t adapt to the next cycle of training. It’s easy to want to leave that part out, because you get the mentality that you just want to work harder and harder, but recovery is definitely an important part of training.”

Hall believes that everything he does as a long-distance runner can and should be connected to his spiritual life. He believes that work and worship need to be interwoven—a concept advocated by Brother Lawrence, a seventeenth century Carmelite monk whose life Hall has studied. “You have to make a point to get into God’s Word—even if it’s just a little bit every day,” Hall says. “I also do my best to pray without ceasing [as instructed in 1 Thessalonians 5:17]. That’s a very challenging Scripture for me. But I’ve been very inspired by Brother Lawrence. It didn’t matter what he was doing—if he was doing the dishes or whatever—he could always be praying. So I’ve tried to take those quiet moments and make them times of prayer.”

Ultimately, endurance for Hall—both physically and spiritually speaking—is all about picking himself up. As a kid, he always pondered what it would take to be an Olympian. Now that he has achieved that lofty goal, he remains humbled by the responsibility attached to such a title. “It’s not like I feel like I’m so great or that I’ve done anything that special to deserve to get to the Olympics,” Hall says. “I feel like the thing I’ve done best is that I’ve just gotten back up from all of the licking I’ve taken, both physically and spiritually. I’m a pretty black-and-white person. I’ll try to live the best I can; and then I’ll mess up and fall, and I’ll get all down and upset with myself. I’ve learned over the years not to let myself get as emotionally down when I mess up, and I try to pick myself up off the ground quicker after making a mistake.”

Throughout the process, Hall has clung to the encouraging message found in Proverbs 24:16: “Though a righteous man falls seven times, he will get up, but the wicked will stumble into ruin.” “I love that verse,” Hall says. “It really inspires me because I feel like it summarizes a lot of my physical and spiritual journeys to this point. I’m definitely not perfect by any stretch.”

Hall admits that the quest for godly excellence can seem overwhelming at times. But one thing he has come to understand as truth is the fact that excellence cannot exist without endurance and that endurance can only come through a relationship with Christ.

“Seeking God at a young age is so important,” Hall says. “When I was 14 years old, I got this idea to run around the lake in my hometown. It was almost like God was whispering that into my ear. And because I decided to obey that and give it a shot, here I am an Olympian and I’m a professional athlete, and I’m doing what I feel like God has made me to do.

“A big part of starting out on your path to excellence is figuring out what God has called you to do and how He’s made you and then making those decisions to follow that calling in your life at a young age,” Hall concludes. “It really changes the whole trajectory of your life.”

Go

1. What are some one-word labels that your friends, teammates or coworkers would use to describe what you are all about? Of those labels, which ones would you rank as the most important? The least important? What are some hidden abilities or characteristics that you would like others to recognize in you?

2. Read 2 Chronicles 16:9. When God’s eyes fall on you, what do you think He sees in your heart? How would finding your identity in Christ change your motives for excellence?

3. Read Philippians 4:12-13. How does an attitude of contentment give strength to those striving for excellence? How do you think verse 12 relates to the inspirational truth found in verse 13?

4. Read Leviticus 25:2-4. How can this passage in Leviticus apply to both our physical and spiritual training? When did a time of rest allow you to push forward and be successful in competition?

5. Read Proverbs 24:16. Hall believes that the key to endurance is not getting emotionally down after making a mistake. How does this passage in Proverbs inspire you to never give up? Describe a time when you stumbled or failed but chose to continue. Where did you find the courage to do so?

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Bible Reference:

1 Thessalonians 5



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