

Space for God

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Stuart Weir

“It is good and right that our churches are setting a clear Christian emphasis during this World Championship. We are opening up space for God. It is necessary that sportsmen and women have the opportunity...to turn to God in prayer and share about their faith”.

So said Dr Wolfgang Huber, the most senior Bishop in the German state church at the special worship service held in the Berlin Cathedral at the beginning of the World Athletics Championships (15-23 August 2009).

To some it may seem strange that you would want to accommodate God in a sports event but really it is the most natural thing in the world. If God is the creator of the world and of all that is in it, then that must include sport and our ability to play and enjoy it.

Yet the step taken by the German churches to hold a special service was a formal recognition of the connection between sport and faith. As well as leaders of the German Catholic and Protestant churches, those taking part in the service included Clemens Prokop, President of the German Athletics Federation, Stephanie Brown Trafton, reigning Olympic Champion in the discus and Solomon Gacece from Kenya, representing the international chaplains to the championship.

The Berlin Organising Committee has also recognized the spiritual needs of the athletes by appointing a team of 20 chaplains from all continents. An “Oasis of Silence” in each of the two official team hotels as well as the chapel, which was built as an integral part of the Berlin Olympic Stadium, are available for athletes to sit quietly, pray or talk to a chaplain.

Allyson Felix, two-time world champion in the 200 metres is in no doubt about the value of chaplains. “A major championship is a time when you definitely rely more on your faith. The Bible studies that the chaplain has done with the US team have been a help to me”.

One of the clearest arguments for the need for spiritual support during a major championship, was found on the website of UK athletics, which quoted

Marilyn Okoro after the Women's 800 metres semi-final this week, "I've been a nervous wreck all day. I've had to call on my strength and my faith in God and really believe why I'm here".

A senior coach in the Kenyan team insisted that the chaplain, Solomon Gacece attended the first team meeting in Berlin to pray a blessing on the team.

Nett Knox, who has worked with the Australian Track and Field team for several years says of the World Championships, "I am here to support the athletes and team officials in any way I can – practically, emotionally and spiritually".

Former 800 metres World Champion, Zulia Calatayud said that Armenio Anjos, who has been a chaplain at many major events had "helped me to know how to face fear, success and failure".

Anjos describes his role as being there "to serve the athletes and to help them perform to the best of their potential. If an athlete shares with me their fear and struggles, I try to help them deal with it so that they can go to the stadium with no distractions. The question for me is always 'How can I help this athlete?' Prayer is a big part of that". Competitors with no obvious faith are often open to prayer in the stress of competition.

Chaplains are called upon to meet a wide range of needs during a major sports event. That can range from how to deal with media attention for the successful or how to cope with the crushing burden of failure or the disappointment of an injury or a fall in a race, which deprives the athlete of the chance of competing for a medal. In one Olympics chaplains had to console an athlete whose husband was killed in an accident during the games.

The Berlin Organising Committee of the World Athletics Championships have done well to recognize the spiritual – as well as the physical and emotional needs of the athletes. The Christian community has been quick to respond to the invitation.

Let's give the last word to Bishop Huber: "One can bring before God both the joy over a victory as well as disappointments over defeats. In one as in the other case we know that with God the everlasting crown and everlasting dignity are ours".

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<http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/comment/faith/article6805363.ece>

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