

AHEAD OF THE CROWD

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READING

Today, we speak about the quest for perfection. Yesterday, many of us saw or heard the horse Big Brown win the Preakness easily in the second race in the Triple Crown. Only eleven horses have won all three races. Wilma Rudolph was one of the great human runners of all time. She and her mother had a dream. We tell her story drawn from a variety of sources,

Wilma Rudolph was born on June 23, 1940 in . . . Tennessee, [the] twentieth of twenty-two children. When Wilma was just four the doctors told her mother that her daughter had polio. After losing the use of her left leg when she was six, the doctors fitted her with metal leg braces.

"I spent most of my time trying to figure out how to get them off," she said. "My doctor told me I would never walk again. My mother told me I would. I believed my mother." In 1947 her mother took her to a hospital for blacks in Nashville, 50 miles from their home, twice a week. Her care required constant care at home as well. Many nights her mother, tired after a long day's work, would sit on Wilma's bed and massage her daughter's leg well into the evening hours.

Rudolph wore a leg brace until she was 11 years old. Then, one Sunday, she removed it and walked down the aisle of her church. By the time she entered high school, she could walk and run normally. Well, after recovering the full use of her l

legs, Rudolph never ran normally again. She was extraordinary. In high school, she joined the basketball team, where she set state records for scoring and leading her team to the state championship. By the time she was 16, she earned a berth on the U.S. Olympic track and field team and came home from the 1956 Melbourne Games with an Olympic bronze medal in the 400 meter relay.

At the 1960 Summer Olympics in Rome she became the first American woman to win three gold medals in the 100 meter, 200 meter and the 400 meter relay. The temperature climbed toward 100 degrees, 80,000 spectators jammed the Stadio Olimpico. Rudolph ran the 100-meter dash in an impressive 11 seconds flat. She also won the 200-meter dash in 23.2 seconds, a new Olympic record. After these twin triumphs, she was ... hailed throughout the world as "the fastest woman in history." Finally, on September 11, 1960, she combined with Tennessee State teammates Martha Hudson, Lucinda Williams and Barbara Jones to win the 400-meter relay in 44.5 seconds, setting a world record.

Commenting on her career, Rudolph said, "Winning is great, sure, but if you are really going to do something in life, the secret is learning how to lose. Nobody goes undefeated all the time. If you can pick up after a crushing defeat, and go on to win again, you are going to be a champion someday.

References

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SERMON

JOHN: *We've got the horse right here. His name is Paul Revere.*

Each year, horses much like Paul Revere, Valentine, and Epitaph enter the Belmont Stakes, the third of the three races that make up the famed triple crown of horse racing. The horses give their all, but only one of them can win. Once in twenty or thirty years, the same horse wins all three races. Wins the Triple Crown. That horse approaches perfection, goes down in history, leaving stories that are told for generations.

There are problems in the horse racing industry. Some say there are great abuses that need to be addressed. But whatever the downside, these horses are bred to seek perfection. These horses love to compete, love to be the best. We may be watching history being made this year by Big Brown.

Today we tell the story of one of the perfect ones. Secretariat.

Secretariat was born March 30, 1970. He was a beautiful red colt, with impressive lineage, and a nearly twenty-five-foot stride. Think about that for a moment. Picture four people, each my size, lying head to foot, and then imagine a horse whose legs span that full distance and a little more.

His owners thought early on about racing him, but found that he was easily distracted. Focus is important in a race horse. So his trainer tried putting blinkers on him to keep him looking straight ahead. Secretariat

began to get the idea. Still, his first race began poorly. Just out of the gate, two other horses slammed into him. It was a short race, so there wasn't much time to make up the lost ground. Still, he managed to finish fourth. That was surprising under the circumstances. Some reporters began to watch him. The rest of the year, Secretariat won every race but one in which he was disqualified. He was named Horse of the Year.

In Secretariat's third year, he won all of his early races except one in which he had an abscess in his mouth. Dreams of the coveted triple crown began to mount. At the Kentucky Derby, Secretariat was slow out of the starting gate. He was last as the horses came around the stretch for the first time. This race, however, was longer than his first one. Long enough for Secretariat to stretch out. Unlike most horses who slow down towards the end of a race, Secretariat ran each quarter mile faster than the one before it. His nearest rival, Sham, broke the track record, but finished second. Secretariat set a new track record and won by two-and-a-half lengths.

At the Preakness two weeks later, Secretariat was last out of the gate again. Now any mathematician or horse race follower knows that you want to run as close to the inside of the track as possible because that's the shortest distance. But Secretariat took off on his own to the outside, going around the other horses, passing them all. Instead of losing steam, Secretariat led the pack the rest of the race, beating second-place Sham by almost three lengths, unofficially setting another track record.

PHYLLIS: By the time the Belmont Stakes came around, few horses wanted to compete with Secretariat. Only four horses challenged him, among them that near great horse, Sham. The Belmont Stakes is twelve furlongs, substantially longer than either the Derby or the Preakness. Horses who conquer the first two races sometimes cannot keep up their speed that long. This time, Secretariat and Sham left the starting gate right away. Both battled for the lead for the first five furlongs, ten lengths ahead of their nearest rivals. Then Secretariat began to pull away. Now once a horse has a comfortable lead, it's common to slow down a little. But as owner Penny Chenery would later say, this was the day that Secretariat just felt like running. What a show he put on that Saturday afternoon. He flew around the far turn at Belmont Park; the distance between him and rest of the field increasing quickly and by incredible margins. It was 10 lengths; then 12; then 14; then 20. At one point, jockey Eddie Arcaro thought he was gaining on the Secretariat, because the horse looked smaller and smaller. Sometimes when a horse gets tired he seems to shrink. Instead of slowing down, however, Secretariat passed the finish line, 31 lengths, about the length of a football field, in front of the rest of the field.

No horse has ever won the Belmont and very rarely any other race, by a greater margin. He smashed the record for the course by two full seconds. More than 5,300 race goers kept their winning tickets as keepsakes, rather than cashing them in. Sham, who had raced against the big colt three times,

finished 43 lengths behind him, heartbroken. Sham never raced again.

It was reported that golfer Jack Nicklaus who was watching the race fell to his knees before his TV set, cried and pounded his fist on the floor. His reaction disturbed him. Why me? I'm not a racing fan, Nicklaus told CBS race commentator Heywood Hale-Broun.

Jack, he said, your whole life is a quest for perfection, and you saw it in the Belmont, and it moved you. Nicklaus nodded.

Secretariat is the only Triple Crown winner to set a time record in all three races. One of those records is unofficial because of a malfunction, but all of his records still stand. His Belmont Stakes is widely considered to be the greatest performance by a thoroughbred race horse ever, anywhere. He died in 1989, at age 19. The necropsy revealed a 21-pound heart, nearly twice the normal size.

JOHN: Wilma Rudolph also had a big heart. She practiced and practiced, pushing herself beyond the wildest dreams of her doctors, who expected her paralysis to be permanent. Then, when she went to the Olympics, she ran on a sprained ankle, ignoring pain and injury, running better than she had ever run before, recovering from a fumble, to win not one but three gold medals.

We have become wary of the quest for perfection. Too often it has meant not only self-sacrifice but self-destruction. Too often, it has left in its wake driven people, filled with guilt, heartbroken, like Sham, at their failures, unable to enjoy their successes. For the shadow side of the quest for perfection includes both an obsessive pursuit of the impossible and self-righteous judgment of those we deem less worthy.

But that is to misunderstand perfection. The Buddha tried asceticism on his search for enlightenment, at one time limiting himself to six grains of rice a day. He is quoted as saying that during this period he could touch the skin on the front of his stomach and feel his backbone. But he discovered that this was not the road to enlightenment and discarded such extreme measures for what he called a middle way.

Too often in the search for perfection, we lose sight of what it looks like. We become so extreme that we get lost in the details. The Buddha threatened his health in the search for an end to suffering. A parent takes on five more clients to cover a big mortgage while the parent's child is being tempted by drugs. We color-code our files while someone is starving. This isn't perfection.

PHYLLIS: Perfection waits for those of us who dedicate our lives to realizing the potential for the divine that lies within each one of us, following a call to love, to create, to run for President, to practice medicine,

to run faster than anyone else has ever done. Perfection is the unwrapping of the special gift that the universe has granted each one of us. One of the runners in the movie Chariots of Fire said that when he runs, he feels God's pleasure. The true quest for perfection brings God's music to our hearts. The gift may be running, but it may also be insight, a hearty laugh, a stillness that brings peace to all who come within its embrace.

Too often in the search for perfection, we drown out that song. The search becomes about ourselves, our insecure selves, our needy, greedy selves. We try to be perfect so that others will admire us. So that we will finally think that we are good enough. So that we will be better than others. We find ourselves snapping at others who do not meet our high standards. The music stops. We lose the joy.

Isn't perfection instead about devoting our lives to becoming incarnations of the divine, while letting go of the need to succeed? Letting go of the need to have others recognize our efforts? Isn't it letting go of the desire to judge others whom we perceive are not trying as hard as we are? Isn't it being filled with the holy as we work, planting a garden beside a busy road, playing basketball with our children, or, like Wilma Rudolph's mother, sitting in the back of a bus with a daughter on the way to the hospital, trusting that the laundry and the cooking and sewing will get done in time, well enough? Isn't it making a difference in the world? Whether it is sweeping up broken glass in an alley or writing a concerto, perfection is

working with joy, with love, with passion. It may even be as pure as simply *being* a person of joy, of love, of passion.

Wilma Rudolph's mother had twenty-two children. She had to sew their clothes herself out of patterned feed bags. She had to cook and clean and nurse her family when they were ill. Still, she found time and energy to take Wilma to Nashville twice a week, fifty miles away, for treatment. Was her life any less a quest for perfection than Wilma's? Was her accomplishment any less? Is it any wonder that Wilma did what she did? Was who she was?

The quest for perfection isn't easy. We have to be able to find a stillness deep enough to hear our calling, which may not be what we wish it were. It takes steadfastness in the face of our own fears as well as the obstacles the world places before us. It takes the ability to let go of greed and pride and our yearning for control. It takes courage and generosity and a loud, hearty laugh. It takes acceptance that we will never be perfect along with the determination to keep on trying.

But, oh! The gifts we bear sleeping inside us that we can give one another! The gifts we bring to ourselves! The gifts we have for the world!

Listen, the starting bell has rung. Are we ready? Are we ready?