

October 7, 2007

“The Dash” [from ideas from John Ortberg]

2 Tim 4:7 (NIV)

I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.

I don't know if you have either read the book or seen the movie, “*Seabiscuit*.”

Seabiscuit was a champion thoroughbred race horse. From an unpromising start, Seabiscuit became an unlikely champion and a symbol of hope to many US citizens during the Great Depression. Seabiscuit became the subject of a 1949 film, *The Story of Seabiscuit*, a 2001 prize-winning book (*Seabiscuit: An American Legend*, by Laura Hillenbrand), and a more recent 2003 film, *Seabiscuit*. Seabiscuit's greatest moment was in a race against another great thoroughbred horse, War Admiral. War Admiral was a heavy favorite to win. War Admiral was a Triple Crown winner who had not only beat all the other horses it ran against, but beat them by a large margin. Seabiscuit's longtime jockey, Red Pollard, could not ride him because of an injury, and gave his replacement jockey, George “The Iceman” Woolf, advice on how to run the race on Seabiscuit. He told him to have Seabiscuit jump out to an early lead, but when War Admiral starts his final drive for the wire, Pollard told Woolf to do something completely unexpected and unheard of...*let* War Admiral catch up.

This went against all common sense, but here is what Pollard said, “Once a horse gives Seabiscuit the old look-in-the-eye, Seabiscuit begins to run to parts unknown... War Admiral has speed, good speed; speed when unopposed. But with Seabiscuit,” Pollard said, “you could kill him before he'd quit....It's not in his feet George. It's in his heart.”

The crowd assembled, the whole country stopped work to form the largest radio audience that had ever been assembled, it is said that even in the White House, FDR put off a cabinet meeting to listen in to the race on the radio. The bell rang and the race began. Seabiscuit jumped into the lead. Coming into the backstretch, Woolf pulled back ever so gently on the reins as instructed by Pollard. War Admiral drew even with Seabiscuit, both horse fell into a synchronized stride with each another. Woolf could see Seabiscuit looking directly into the eyes of his rival and sensed a subtle hesitation in War Admiral. He leaned down low and called into Seabiscuit's ear to give him everything he had. War Admiral began sliding back as Laura Hillenbrand put it, “as if gravity were pulling him backward.” Woolf made a small motion with his hand to War Admiral's jockey, Charles Kurtsinger, saying, “So long, Charley,” a phrase that would be used by jockeys for decades. Seabiscuit made history that day, winning by four lengths, and pandemonium broke out behind him.

Call it heart, drive or the will to win – whatever you call it, we are deeply moved by competitive greatness. When a competitor prepares his or her mind and body with rigorous (hard and demanding) training, then faces the challenge of his/her life and reaches down deep within him/herself to give every last ounce of effort to the battle, it touches something deep in everyone watching the competition.

Several years ago I got a call from the high school wrestling coach. My son Jesse was still in middle school, but the coach was asking my permission to have Jesse wrestle on the high school team. Jesse trained hard every day. I remember Jesse's first wrestling match at the high school. He was going to be in competition with a wrestler the coach knew he couldn't beat. This other wrestler was older, had more experience, and a good record. The coach's only concern and what he told Jesse was, "don't get pinned." We play to win, but winning doesn't always tell the story. Jesse went out to face his opponent. The gym was packed, and not many knew who Jesse was. Under extreme pressure that night, Jesse showed determination, incredible heart and courage that meant more than the points on the board. Jesse didn't win that match that night, but he didn't get pinned and the fans cheered his effort.

Sometimes the real contest is will you give your best and not give up in the face of a great demand. This extends to overcoming the challenges in your everyday life. In your family, in your marriage, in your faith have you resolved to strive. Something about competition touches a resolve in us to strive, to reach down deep within ourselves and strive to do our best. Life, especially living a life of faith, a life according to Biblical principles is a great challenge or competition. There is a resolve in us that we must call forth, War Admiral comes up and gives us the old look-in-the-eye, and you dig down deeper than you knew you could and say, "So long, Charley." We are all in a battle, but in is in the battle, it is in the struggle that we are offered the opportunity to be our best.

Paul warned about putting too much confidence in the flesh. However, the picture of a runner striving to win a race was also one of his favorite pictures of the life of faith. Let's look at a few:

Phil 3:13-14 NLT

...dear brothers and sisters, I am still not all I should be, but I am focusing all my energies on this one thing: Forgetting the past and looking forward to what lies ahead, I strain to reach the end of the race and receive the prize for which God, through Christ Jesus, is calling us up to heaven.

1 Cor 9:24-27 NLT

Remember that in a race everyone runs, but only one person gets the prize. You also must run in such a way that you will win. All athletes practice strict self-control. They do it to win a prize that will fade away, but we do it for an eternal prize. So I run straight to the goal with purpose in every step. I am not like a boxer who misses his punches. I discipline my body like an athlete, training it to do what it should. Otherwise, I fear that after preaching to others I myself might be disqualified.

And of course there is today's text:

2 Tim 4:6-8 NLT

I have fought a good fight, I have finished the race, and I have remained faithful.

Gordon MacDonald wrote about a comment a relative made after his mother died: "She never really finished anything she started. When things got difficult, she would walk away." As he reflected on her life, Gordon saw a pattern of unfinished projects and unrealized dreams. And he thought about this pattern in his own life. It is a sobering thing, he wrote, to realize that you have a quitter's gene in your DNA.

Keeping your marriage together takes too much effort so you let it drift apart. Living a dedicated Christian life is hard, there are too many failures, it's easier to live as you want, so you stop disciplining yourself, and you fall back into old habits. Trusting God means accepting His will whatever it might be, it means tithing, it means obeying Him even when you don't feel like it. It is easier for you to trust in other things, so you become a mediocre Christian. Bible reading, Bible studies, prayer, church services take time so you let them slip. War Admiral comes down the stretch, and you look away.

"The Dash"

By: Linda Ellis

*I read of a man who stood to speak
At a funeral of a friend.
He referred to the dates on her tombstone
From the beginning...to the end.*

*He noted that first came her date of birth
And spoke the following dates with tears
But he said what mattered most of all
Was the dash between those years*

*For the dash represents all the time
That she spent alive on earth
And now only those who loved her
Know what that little line is worth.*

*For it matters not, how much we own:
The cars...the house...the cash.
What matters is how we live and love
And how we spend our dash.*

*So think about this long and hard...
Are there things you'd like to change?
For you never know how much time is left.
That can still be rearranged*

*If we could just slow down enough
To consider what's true and real.
And always understand
The way other people feel.*

*And be less quick to anger.
And show appreciation more
And love the people in our lives
Like we've never loved before.*

*If we treat each other with respect.
And more often wear a smile
Remembering that this special dash
Might last only a little while*

*So, when your eulogy's being read
With your life's actions to rehash
Would you be proud of the things they say
About how you spent your dash?*

You know how on tombstones they have the date of birth then a dash (-) then the date of death. You had no say in the date (on the left of the dash, the date) of your birth, but know this, God is very pleased that you exist. As a matter of fact He willed for you to exist and created you. The day you were born is one of his favorite days. We don't know the date of our death. We don't usually have much say about that date on the right of the dash either. That brings us to the question of the dash. What are you going to do with your dash? What will you do with the opportunities you have. The dash is yours to do as you want. Will you use it to shape your character, will you use it to know God and serve God better. Or will you use it in to stagnate, hide, be passive in your faith and life?

Don't give up the faith. Don't quit putting your faith in God. Don't quit giving your all for God. Don't let yourself slack off. This is your turn, the bell has sounded and you are in a race, it is your race now. Dig down deep, and give it all you got. What will you do with your dash? Fight the good fight, finish the race, keep the faith.