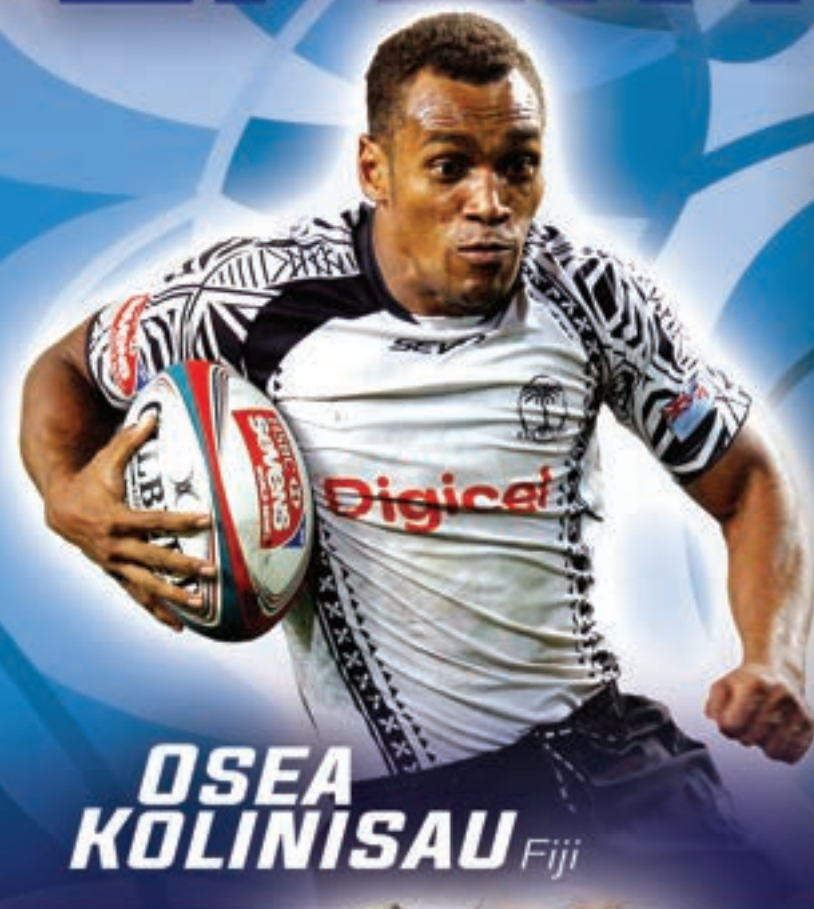


SPORTSPERSON STORIES FROM AROUND THE WORLD

# SPORT GO MAG



**OSEA  
KOLINISAU** *Fiji*



**JANIE  
REED** *USA*



**JANINE  
BECKIE**  
*Canada*



**SIYA  
KOLISI**  
*South Africa*





*Each year, thousands of sportspersons take part in games that may be national, regional or global. For a sportsperson, the years of training endured to prepare for elimination competitions are often painful, grueling and life-transforming.*

*SportGoMag provides sportspersons and fans the opportunity to learn from other sportspersons about how to deal with failure, success, challenges, identity, anger, encouragement, preparation and so many other issues related to sport and life.*

**RAINBOW BRIDGE  
TOKYO, JAPAN**



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# JANIE REED

## LAVISH DISPLAY OF TRUST

*Janie Reed is an American softball outfielder who plays for Team USA. The youngest, yet most decorated softball player of three sisters, Janie is married to a professional American baseball player who shares her love for sports. Her goal is to make a difference in women's sports and share the Gospel with the world.*

Growing up, I was never the standout player. I was not the girl who people would watch and say, "She is going to have the chance to play in the Olympics one day." Heading into the Olympic tryouts was intimidating. It's hard to enter into a competition among you and your own teammates. While aiming to make the Olympic team, I often had to remind myself that I'm competing for one of the 18 spots, not against a certain person.

On the night before the tryouts, a few of us invited all our teammates to join in what has become an annual prayer gathering before tryouts begin. Out of the 29 girls on the team, 20 showed up. This tradition has been so helpful for all of us. With us all being in the same position of trying to make the team, we're able to remind each other that we're there to help each other through the crazy pressure we're experiencing. Instead of hindering each other, we're choosing to help each other.

On the last morning of tryouts, I had a sinking feeling that this may be it — this may be the last time I play softball ... ever. My chance to show the Olympic committee that I had what it takes was almost over and I knew I hadn't played my best. I wasn't ready to be done. With these thoughts haunting me, I called over my teammate



Photos courtesy of USA Softball

### FAVORITE VERSE

*"But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of Him who called you out of darkness and into His wonderful light. Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy." — 1 Peter 2:9-10*



and asked for prayer. After she prayed with me, we looked up to see two of our teammates doing the same. I was struck with the incredible community we've been given on this team. When one of us is down or feeling discouraged, God gives us a teammate to lift us up.

Thankfully, the selection committee doesn't just take into account the performance of the athletes during these four days, they are watching you play throughout the year. And among the amazing talent that surrounded the tryout facility, there wasn't one player that was going to blow another one away. When I saw the list was posted and then found my name on it, I was so humbled.

When I saw my name on that list, I remembered how God has truly brought me here in His power; this was not my own doing. I worked so hard leading up to those tryouts — hitting for hours every night for weeks, with no days off. If I would have played really well during those four days and then made the team, I would have taken much of the credit for it. But the way it happened, God was showing me that even from the very beginning, He's had His hand on my journey.

Recently, I was reading a book in which the author was saying that our faith in God is about walking with God without knowing what the steps are. To do that, we have to display a lavish amount of trust. The way I prepare myself physically directly affects my confidence on the field. The same is true with my heart before God. The more I prepare my heart to trust in Him, the more confident I become that He is in control. As the author of this book put it, we have to care more about who we are dancing with than how our performance is.

Leading up to the Olympic tryouts, I found myself caring more about my performance than about God. I soon realized I have to consider it all loss for the sake of Christ. None of this was ever mine to begin with! Softball was gifted to me; it belongs to God. I have to value God — the One whom I'm walking through life with — more than I care about where He is leading me. I have to go with the flow no matter where He decides to take me. It's about letting go of rationalism and focusing on trust.

The deep desire of my heart is for someone who is looking at my Olympic journey to describe it as a lavish display of trust in God.

# UNITED STATES

SPORTSMAN



# NICK WILLIS

## UNWRAP THE FREE GIFT

*Nick Willis is a middle-distance runner from New Zealand, who has won two Olympic medals in the 1500 meters — silver at the 2008 Beijing Games and bronze at the 2016 Rio Games. Nick and his brother Steve are the only brothers from New Zealand to run the mile under four minutes.*

At the age of 4, I lost my mother to cancer. I was left confused, angry and with a drive to go on with life on my own. The only person I thought I could count on was myself.

For 20 years, I tried everything I thought would bring me happiness and pleasure. Success in running brought me many great opportunities, but my self-focused goals resulted in many hurtful decisions and actions. Something much greater was missing from my life.

All I had achieved was nothing compared to missing my mother, blaming God (if He even existed) for her unfair death. In depression, I felt like I had nowhere else to go. I needed guidance and direction with real purpose.

Something started tapping on my heart, telling me that my mom was watching my life from Heaven. I tried to fight it off with more alcohol and late nights, but the knocking on my heart became louder and louder. This became impossible to deny. I knew God was chasing me, and had been for many years. Finally, I decided to stop running from Him.

So in October 2003, I asked Jesus to forgive me for my anger and disobedience toward God, and for all the people I had hurt along the way. He came into my heart

FAVORITE VERSE

**“Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with that person, and they with Me.” — Revelation 3:20**



and swept me clean. All the anger and bitterness toward my mother's death became healed, and I was ready to restart my life fresh.

My life has changed forever, and I will never feel empty or unfulfilled again — so long as I don't put God on “call-waiting.” God is real, and He walks alongside me every day. He convicts me when I stray, and loves me when I'm lonely. But greatest of all, He has given me His promise that I will enter His Heavenly Kingdom, and celebrate with my mother and family, when my time here on earth is finished.

Nothing I have done during my life has allowed me to deserve this. My selfish existence is proof that God can and wants to forgive everyone. We just have to ask.

Jesus is the only man to have lived the perfect life. He never wronged anyone, and yet He was beaten and humiliated for crimes of which He was innocent. After remaining silent through all this punishment, He was hung and killed on a cross — a punishment reserved for the worst of criminals. Three days later, Jesus rose from the dead, proving that He was the Son of God, and that He had fulfilled all prophecies about a Savior who would pay the price for all people's wrongs. He opened the gates to Heaven.

Jesus is not about religion. He is a living God who wants to be a part of our lives. He knows we are messed up and struggle with different temptations. He wants to help free us, so we can enjoy life to the full, not live a boring life following strict rules and regulations.

Jesus offers His life to us as a free gift. It is up to us whether we choose to unwrap the gift waiting. I pray that you will open it and see what you find inside.

# ZEALAND



# DEBBIE FLOOD



## GOD HAS ME IN HIS HANDS

Great Britain's **Debbie Flood** was pulled into the sport of rowing while training to be a prison officer. She competed in three Olympics, won two Olympic medals, and won three world championship gold medals. But it didn't start out easy for her. With a career full of highs and lows, Flood shares how her faith in Jesus Christ has been her strength through it all.

I look back on my life in sport and see how God has taken me on a unique path with different people and circumstances than I had expected. When I found out I wasn't going to the 2000 Sydney Olympics, I was devastated. I questioned God, asking, "God, why am I here? I just wasted two years of my life, what was the point of that?" I went from an extreme low to having an amazing year. Now I can look back and see where God was taking me.

Growing up, I loved sport and tried lots of sports. I would watch the Olympics and think the athletes were superhuman. I wondered if I would ever be good enough to have the honor of representing my country and going to the Olympic Games. I tried lots of sports and loved competing. I took up judo partly for self-defense, because I went to school in a bit of a rough area, and partly because I was seeking a career as a prison officer. Part of our training was on the rowing machine and I loved it because it was new. I trained hard.

Alamy Photos: Andrew Matthews, PA Wire

### FAVORITE VERSE

**"Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways submit to Him, and He will make your paths straight." — Proverbs 3:5-6**



One day someone came up to me and asked if I was a rower. I had never been in a boat and had no idea what rowing really was. He said I was getting really good times on the rowing machine, so I went on a rowing course for a bit of a break. And though I spent most of my first week falling in, it picked up from there. Two years later, I was a world champion.

A few words of encouragement and someone who put time into me made all the difference for me. My coach taught me how to row, but it took time. I came in last place out of more than 100 people in the junior trials for the Sydney Olympics. I came in 14th in the Kingston trials a month later, and then I won the final trials a few months after that.

My life plan was to finish school, train full time for two years, go to the Sydney Olympics and then get on with my life as a veterinarian. I moved away from home; I didn't know anyone besides my coach. I was aiming to go to Sydney in single sculls, and I had a single race-off in the selection trials. I was leading the race for the first 1500 meters in a 2000-meter race, but in the last 500 meters, my opponent pulled up and I lost the race. I wasn't going to the Sydney Olympics as a racer.

But my coach encouraged me to keep going. I was invited to be a spare at the Sydney Games, but I didn't want to be a spare. Instead, I went to the Under-23 World Championships and became the first Brit to win that event. I got to the end of that year and thought, "Wow, this is not what I had intended to do, but if I had to do it all over again, this is what I would do." I wasn't good enough for the Olympics at that time, but yet I had such an amazing year. For me, it wasn't about the wins, it was about realizing that God's really got me in His hands and has a plan for me.

I often come back to my favorite verse in the Bible which says, "Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways submit to Him, and He will make your paths straight" (Proverbs 3:5-6). For me, that year was a learning experience. We're always learning in our faith in Christ. My life is a platform in which I get to know God and I get to know myself as well.

Being a Christ-follower and understanding God wasn't an automatic thing, it was a choice I had to make for myself. I made that choice to ask God into my life and have a relationship with Him. None of us are perfect; we don't put God first in our life most of the time. That breaks our relationship with our Creator. But when we hear the name of Jesus and understand that's how God gave us the opportunity to come back to Him — through believing that God sent His Son Jesus to die on the cross and take away all the wrong stuff we've ever done — we can restore that broken relationship. We still mess up every day, but having a relationship with Jesus, and having Him in my life, changes everything.

I want to be right with God, so I prayed, "Jesus come into my life." That was the start of my perspective on life, and that carried into my sport. My faith has been something that has given me such a grounding and sustained me through the crazy world of sport. See where it took me?

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# OSEA KOLINISAU

## THE SOURCE OF ALL MY JOY

*Osea Kolinisau is a professional Fijian rugby player who was the flag bearer for his country at the 2016 Rio Olympics. He was also captain of the Fiji sevens team and led it to the gold medal — Fiji's first-ever medal at an Olympic Games. Kolinisau plays professionally in the United States with Major League Rugby.*

Getting to where I am in my rugby career took a lot of hard work and training. I'm thankful for all of my father's teaching and support. As a pastor, my father taught me that with hard work and faith in Jesus Christ, nothing is impossible. I've seen that come to fruition in my own life. I know that it was Christ who gave me my talent and I'm thankful for the opportunities He's given me to use it for His glory.

Heading to the 2016 Rio Olympics was incredible. When they told me that I would be the one to carry our country's flag, it really meant a lot to me. Whenever I had watched the Olympic opening ceremony prior to that, I would watch the lights, all the sportspersons walking out, and the flags which represented the many countries. Knowing I would be walking this flag out in one of the greatest sporting events in the world made me emotional. Rugby is Fiji's No. 1 international sport. I was proud to be able to represent not only myself and my team, but my family and my country as well. This was a huge honor.



AP Photos/Kamran Jebreili, Themba Hadebe

FAVORITE VERSE

**"Before I was born the Lord called; from my mother's womb He has spoken my name." — Isaiah 49: 1**



Being at the Olympics brought a whole new level of joy to me. Before, I would always cry when our national anthem was played. But at the Olympic Games, I couldn't help but smile.

People would ask me, "Why are you smiling so much?" And I couldn't answer. I just wanted to laugh because of the joy that was bubbling up inside of me.

But even greater than the chance to represent my country is the privilege I have to represent the Kingdom of God. Nothing compares to that! You can win a gold medal, but the greatest prize is to know you are a child of God. The biggest goal for any person should be to know Jesus as their personal Lord and Savior.

God gives me the joy I have for the game of rugby. He is the source of all my joy. With Christ in me, I experience a peace and calmness that is unexplainable. My teammates and I make sure we pray and spend time with God before and after every time we play. In the mornings, we have devotions together and then again after we train. We all know that Jesus Christ is the reason we play this game. He who saved us from death and brought us to life through His death and resurrection is on our side.

When I'm done playing rugby, I hope that people will look back, see the way I played and realize that I was different — not because of what I did, but because of Whom I believe in. When people see where I am today, I want them to know I got here because of Christ alone.

Without Christ in my life, I wouldn't be the person I am today. I wouldn't have won an Olympic medal. I'm glad God chose me to compete and win, but I'm even more glad that I'm a part of His Kingdom, which is worth more than gold.

# Fiji



# SHELINDA JANSEN

## NOTHING WITHOUT JESUS CHRIST

*Shelinda Jansen is a Sri Lankan sprinter who specializes in the 100m and 200m races. In the 2018 South Asian Junior Games, Jansen won the bronze medal in the 100m and 200m, and her team won gold in the 4x100m relay. That same year, she placed ninth overall in the 200m at the Youth Olympic Games in Argentina, where she clocked a personal-best time of 24.07 seconds in a 200m heat.*

I was 8 years old and competing in my first sports meet when a pastor gave my parents a word from the Lord about me. This pastor was visiting Sri Lanka, and though I was too young to understand what she was talking about, my parents held onto what she said: that one day I will bring pride to Sri Lanka; that one day I will bring a medal to Sri Lanka.

None of us knew I had a God-gifted talent for running. The first person to see the talent in me was my mother, who is also the person who has always been with me through all my ups and downs in life.

I was a swimmer first; I was never interested in athletics. I loved swimming and never imagined I would stop, but my mom and father knew me better than I knew myself, so I began competing in athletics. I continued in athletics and soon became the under-9 champion in Sri Lanka. I started personal training with my coach and began to get better and better.



AP Photos/Kamran Jebreili, Themba Hadebe

### FAVORITE VERSE

***“I can do all this through Him who gives me strength.” — Philippians 4:13***

At 17 years old, I first represented Sri Lanka at the 2018 South Asian Junior Games, where I won bronzes in the 100m and 200m races and gold in the 4x100m relay. Since then, my life has been different.

The most unforgettable competition I've ever had was at the 2018 Youth Olympic Games in Buenos Aires, Argentina. This was my first world event for the 200m race and I was so scared. In the first stage of the competition, I was too nervous and my body was not reacting well under pressure. I finished the race by placing fifth in that heat and 16th in the world.

I was heartbroken because I couldn't even run a personal-best time, but I didn't give up. I had a lot of support from people back in Sri Lanka and I knew my coach would always be behind me, supporting me. I also knew my mom and dad would never fail to push me forward. But most of all, I knew Jesus didn't want me to give up what I started. He wanted me to see the prophecy coming true.

I didn't give up; instead, I had to rise up. I had to keep myself together and trust in the Lord and in His perfect timing. On the day of the final race, I ran and finished in first place in my heat with a new personal best of 24.07 seconds! I was ranked as the ninth-fastest junior in the world for the 200m — the fastest in Asia and South Asia, and the fastest in Sri Lankan junior athletic history after Olympians Susanthika Jayasinghe and Damayanthi Darsha! I knew this was God's prophetic words, spoken through that pastor.

I'm nothing without Jesus Christ and I will never be ashamed to call His name out. I'm proud of who I've become today, but I also know I have a long way to go. This was just the beginning. One day, I hope to become the world's best runner and make my Jesus, my nation, my family and my coaches proud.

# LANKA



# DYAN BUIIS

## BUILT WITH A PURPOSE

*Dyan Buis is a Paralympic sprinter and long jumper from South Africa. With a mild case of cerebral palsy, Buis competes in the T38 class. At the 2016 Paralympics in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, he claimed the gold medal in the men's 400m when he ran a personal-best time of 49.46 seconds.*

The first time I joined a camp for elite athletes with disabilities, I suddenly knew. I realized why God had made me the way He had — to bring glory to His name.

Some people develop cerebral palsy after experiencing a traumatic event, others are born with it. I was born with the disability — a lack of oxygen to my brain before birth caused communication to the left side of my body to be impaired, as if my left side is somewhat numb — so I don't know life without it. Since I attended a mainstream school while growing up, I competed in sports with kids who had no disabilities. I think that's why I've always been so competitive — I wanted to prove to everyone else, and myself, that I could compete with them.

I was never chosen for sports; I never made the teams in high school because people assumed I wouldn't be able to tackle well or keep up with others. But in track and field, all you had to do to earn a spot on the team was win, and I did. My dreams of competing in the Olympics were birthed in high school, but it wasn't until 2010 when I began to compete in sports with others having disabilities like myself.

There were times when I became frustrated or discouraged. After I accepted Jesus Christ as my personal



### FAVORITE VERSE

*“For I know the plans I have for you,’ declares the Lord, ‘plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.’” — Jeremiah 29:11*



Lord and Savior, and gave my life to Him, I had the question, “Why God? Why do I have this disability?” I knew God had the ability to heal me if He wanted to, but He hadn’t. It wasn’t until I went to a camp for elite athletes with disabilities that God made it very clear to me that He had a purpose for me. I read a Bible story in the book of John, Chapter 9, which tells of a man who was born blind. People asked Jesus, “Why was this man born blind? Did he sin, or his parents?” The Bible says, “Neither this man nor his parents sinned,” but this happened so that the works of God might be displayed in him.” This story inspired and motivated me to compete even harder. I knew in that moment that my condition exists to glorify God.

If you knew the small town from which I came, you’d say it’s insane to think someone from that area could make it to the Paralympics. And you’d be right. Going to the Paralympics has been one of the greatest achievements anyone from my town has ever accomplished! The only reason I made it is because God placed this dream on my heart. He had a plan for my life and He brought me there. When I walk into a stadium, I feel His presence.

I have had many challenges come while pursuing this dream. I once experienced such financial struggle that my family and I had to move into someone’s backyard — until God granted me with a scholarship to train for my sport in the town of Stellenbosch, where my family and I were well fed and housed, and I was able to train. Another year, while I did the worst in terms of my performance, I experienced God’s love and embrace in the midst of it in a greater way than I ever had. I now see how God continues to make every attempt necessary to shape me into the man He has created me to be — to do everything according to His purpose and His Word.

Though I still know God could heal me instantaneously, He still has a plan for me in sports — to bring Him glory and fight for others with disabilities to have equality in sport. Through my disability and journey in sport, God has shaped me to be a better person and a more humble Christ-follower. When I am interviewed for my sport, I’m able to tell others how God inspires me and is always there for me.

This sport has become a great platform to do the work and ministry of God. I am only a small boy from a small town who inspires a nation. I’m thankful for the mission God’s given me and the journey He has placed me on.

# A F S R O U T C H A



# JANINE BECKIE

## SHOWING AS MUCH JESUS AS I CAN

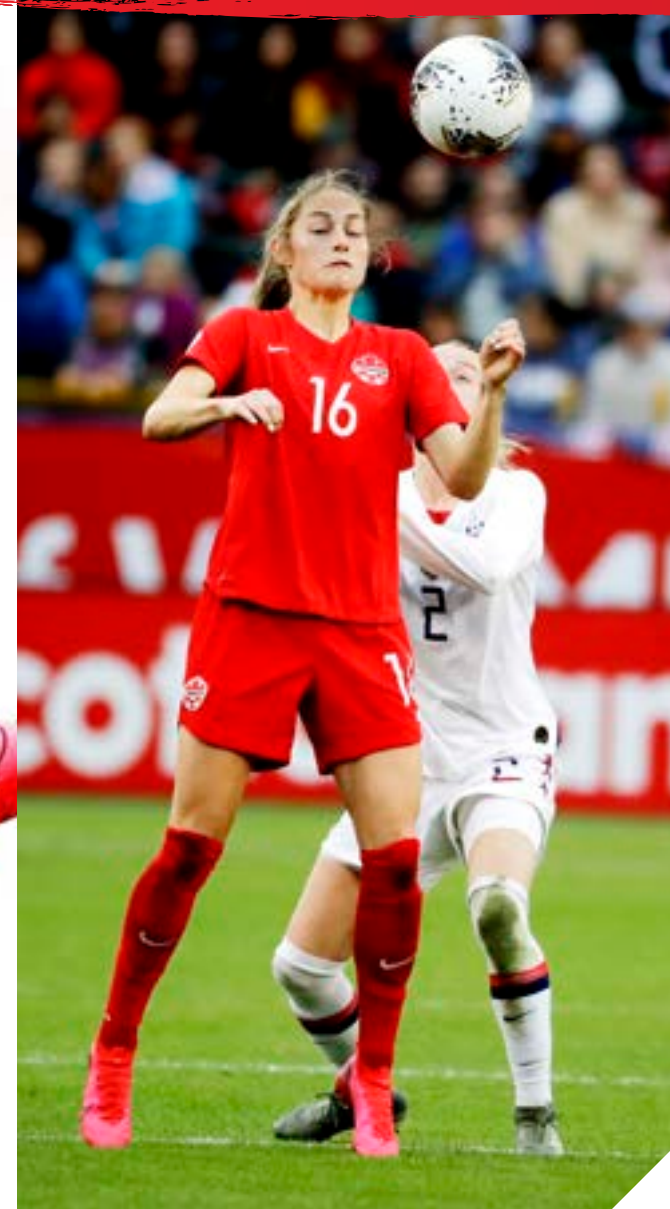
*Janine Beckie is a professional soccer player who plays for the Canadian women's national team. A dual citizen of the United States and Canada, Janine was born in Colorado in the United States, but now lives in Canada. She was a part of the Canadian team that won bronze at the 2016 Rio de Janeiro Olympics, where she scored three goals and started all but one game.*



AP Photos/Chris Carlson, Andy Jacobs/oh

### FAVORITE VERSE

***"[B]ut those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint." — Isaiah 40:31***



I had sacrificed so much to make the team that was going to the 2015 World Cup. I had left my home country, my family and friends, and my school early that year. I had spent countless hours preparing and training to compete, but along with one other girl, I was the last cut made from the team before the World Cup. From my couch, I watched the team I had been training with represent Canada in the World Cup.

Though I had grown up in the Church and had given my life to Christ as a teenager, I was still trying to figure out what it meant to be a follower of Christ. I was having a hard time detaching my identity from my sport. When you spend so much time focused on one thing — eat, sleep, practice and do it all over again — it's hard not to. On top of that, I was in a different city with no close friends or family. I should have relied more on God and my faith in Him during this time, but I didn't. So when I was cut from the roster, I was devastated.

But because of my faith in Jesus Christ, I knew this wasn't the end of the road; that wasn't how my story would be written. I see now that God had another opportunity for me. The following year I made the team that represented Canada at the 2016 Rio Olympics, where we won bronze!

I have been blessed with the talent I have and I work hard to be the best I can be. By being persistent to trust God's process and develop the ability He's given me, I've seen Him work in my heart and my career.

The biggest lesson I learned in being cut from the 2015 World Cup team was humility. I was raised by parents who taught me and my siblings to be humble athletes. I believe a big role of every Christ-follower is to look as much like Jesus as we can. Whenever I'm put in a situation where I have to make a decision, I try to ask myself, "What is the lasting impression I want to give my teammate or coach?"

I want others to remember me as being kind, compassionate and a great teammate, while also being hard-working and relentless on the field. I used to think those two things couldn't coexist — taking fierce action on the field and being kind off the field — but I know that God gave me a competitive spirit for a reason. You can't go far in sports without being competitive.

As I grow as a player and win more trophies, my platform will continue to grow and more people will take notice. I want to show as much Jesus as I can to as many people as I can.

My favorite verse is Isaiah 40:31, which says, "[B]ut those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint." I love this verse because it's an important reminder for me that I'm not responsible to do everything out of my own strength. I can find my strength in Jesus. It's a reminder that I'm a child of God — something we should be more aware of as His followers. When we can't find the answer or don't have enough strength, we can run to the Father and He will bring renewal.

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# GERMÁN SANCHEZ

## LETTING HIM WORK IN AND THROUGH ME

*Germán Sánchez is a Mexican diver who has competed in the 2008, 2012 and 2016 Olympics. He won a silver medal in 2012 in the synchronized 10-meter platform event with his partner, Iván García. In 2016, Sánchez won another silver medal in the individual 10m platform competition, while he and García placed fifth in the synchronized 10m platform. Sánchez is the only Mexican diver who has won Olympic medals in both individual and synchronized events.*

My life changed completely during the 2012 London Olympics — that was when I learned about Jesus. Someone came inside the Olympic village to pray and share the Word of God with us. In the past, I did everything in my own strength, which can be a heavy burden. But when I met Jesus and began to let Him work in and through me, things became easier.

As an athlete, and as a human, your heart aches when you lose, when you get injured, or when things do not go as expected. One day, my pastor shared this truth with me: “Remember, Jesus was crucified and was in the tomb for three days, but He arose the third day.” We will pass through these hard times. For those who believe in Jesus Christ, there is hope that better days are to come. The worst thing that could happen to an athlete like me is to not qualify for the Olympic Games. But even if that did happen, it would not change my life, who I am or the purpose I have in Christ.

One of the best lessons I learned was back in 2013. If they had given me 2.5 more points in a competition, we could have won, but they didn’t and we didn’t win. God brought to my memory the 13th

### FAVORITE VERSE

**“Jesus looked at them and said, ‘With man this is impossible, but not with God; all things are possible with God.’” — Mark 10:27**

verse from the fourth chapter in the book of Philippians in the Bible, which says, “I can do all this through Him who gives me strength.” At that moment, I realized that I had never put attention to the previous verse 12, which says, “I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want.” In order to be a champion, you must learn to enjoy every season, and that includes losing and winning.

I experienced another trial when I had an Achilles heel injury. I cried and complained during this time, questioning God by asking, “Why now? Why me? What am I doing wrong?” Then I remembered a time I was taking a shower and I told God, “I want You to use my life. I surrender my life to You for Your glory through sports.” This does not only happen through victory. God helped me understand that this can happen during failure as well.

This is how I face losing now. It was after this major injury that I took courage to start a Bible study with other sportspersons. I invited them to come to my house to pray with me. They came thinking they were there to encourage me, but I used this opportunity to share God’s purpose with them, since the purpose of my life is not to be an Olympic medalist but to be a man who fears God.

When I joined our national team, I was not a Christ-follower. After I met Jesus, I became intentional in the way I conducted myself to be a good witness. When my teammates, who profess other beliefs, know that I believe in Jesus and they see me praying, they respect it. And sometimes, they allow me to pray with them. It is not my role to convince people about their faith, but I can model Jesus in my life so they can see Him in me.

The way I live my life plays a key role in sharing Jesus with others. I am not perfect, but I can impact people by what I do more than by what I say. I often have people ask me, “How do you keep a positive attitude?” Or, “How can you maintain such confidence under the pressure of these competitions?” When they come to me for counsel, I can share Jesus’ love with them.

I understand it is vital to believe in Jesus in order to serve and help others. I cannot imagine my life without Him.

# MEXICO





MELISSA  
BLOUGH

# DISCOVERING INTIMACY WITH GOD

I never knew my sport would open a door for a collegiate scholarship for me. As one of four children, I didn't know how I'd be able to afford a higher education. I simply loved running track and competing in hurdles; I figured I'd do that until I had to get a traditional job. It wasn't until my sophomore year in high school that I realized doing this thing I loved — running track — could open doors for a brighter future for me. And little did I know that the relationships I would build in college would change my eternal perspective.

Receiving a scholarship to run track at the University of Texas was a great blessing. While there, I was able to get involved in a few different campus ministries that focused on Jesus Christ and how to grow closer to Him. I had accepted Christ into my life at the age of 13 at a summer camp, and it was then that I realized a relationship with Christ wasn't something I had to ask for continually. I only had to ask Jesus into my heart once and He would stay.

But from that age on, I aimed to be a good person. I didn't have a Christ-centered community, nor did I have Godly role models showing me what it looked like to really follow Jesus. I didn't read the Bible; my only time spent with God was when I went

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FAVORITE  
BIBLE  
PASSAGE

*The story of Hosea: I love the metaphor in this story of how we can continually turn away from God and yet He will always pursue us. Even when we are not turning back toward Him, God will come after us — His children.*



to church on Sundays. Suddenly at college, I saw men and women who displayed a personal, intimate relationship with Christ. These people were chasing after Jesus and helping others do the same.

This was where I began to be discipled by other Christ-followers. I began to understand the importance of spending time alone with God and in community with other believers. I never saw this type of lifestyle modeled before; it was hard, at first, for me to come around to the idea of having an everyday relationship with God. It had been a once-a-week, Sunday-morning routine for me. But I began to ask these Christ-followers questions about why it's important to spend time with Jesus, and how I could do that for myself. It's because of these men and women that I know what it means to have intimacy with God.

Now, as I compete internationally with the Colombian national team, I have to make decisions that set me apart. I try to be a Christlike example to whomever I'm with, whether that be my teammates, my siblings or anyone else. So when my teammates ask me why I don't go out drinking or to clubs with them, I have an opportunity to share the love and truth of God with them. While some of my teammates may not understand the choices I make, they respect them. I hope that as we continue to have conversations about what's important to each of us, God opens doors for spiritual discussions.

I'm not willing to compromise my beliefs. Yes, it may be easier and much more comfortable to go along with whatever my teammates are doing, but it's not what we're called to do as Christ-followers. We're not promised a comfortable life. In fact, if we choose to follow Christ, we are promised to face opposition and persecution. That may be in the form of teammates laughing at you for standing out, or it may be as serious as putting your life in danger for making a stance for Christ. But whatever the cost, eternal life with Christ is worth it.

My relationship with Christ is what it is today because of Christ-followers who took the time to pour into me. I think of a woman at my university who spent time with me, sometimes even brief moments, to challenge, encourage and teach me. She never challenged me in a way that felt like she was attacking me, but it was done out of love for me. This type of accountability and mentorship was so critical in my growth as a Christ-follower.

These days, I continue to seek out older, wiser Christ-followers who can help me grow deeper in my walk with Christ. I also look for others whom I can help disciple. By taking the time to develop relationships with my teammates and get to know them outside of our sport, I'm able to discover how to help them encounter Jesus in a personal way. What do they enjoy besides track and field? What are their dreams? What kind of faith journey do they come from?

If you ask questions and really listen, people will share. It may be as simple as asking someone to get coffee to share the love of Christ with them. This small, repetitive act may be how they grow to love and cherish Jesus Christ. It was for me.

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COLOMBIANA



# SIYA KOLISI

## DISCOVERING THE SAVING POWER OF CHRIST

South African rugby player **Siya Kolisi** made his senior-level debut in 2011, and in 2018 was elected as captain of the South African national team, becoming the first black captain in the 126-year history of the Springboks' rugby union team. In 2019, he led South Africa to the Rugby World Cup championship.

I grew up in the impoverished township of Zwide in South Africa, where I was raised by my grandmother because my mother and father were too young to look after me. Ever since I can remember, rugby has been a big part of my life. My dad and uncles played this sport, and as soon as I could, at the age of 8, I started playing too.

Living in the ghetto, we struggled to get by. We couldn't afford to pay for my school and all the fees that went along with it, but I went to school every day because it was where I received my one meal for the day. In the evening, I would return to our two-bedroom home where seven of us lived, take the cushions off the couch and sleep on the floor for the night.

I always enjoyed rugby; I trained every single day for it. Rugby seemed to keep me away from a lot of the bad things going on around me. I lost a lot of friends because while I was focusing on being the best I could be in my sport, they were falling prey to the struggles and

FAVORITE  
VERSE

*"When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and when you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned; the flames will not set you ablaze. For I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior." — Isaiah 43:2-3*



AP Photos/Themba Hadebe, Rui Vieira

temptations of life in the hood. I was set on preparing myself for any opportunity I could, though I didn't know what that may be.

When I was 12 years old, I went out on the field to play with my school team in our first game of the season. Facing a nearby school which had a great coach, we were defeated by 50 points. After the game, that opposing coach approached me and said he thought I had talent. He invited me to play for his school. From there, this coach took me under his wing, becoming more of a father figure to me than I had ever had. He knew how much this opportunity meant to me and I worked hard to take full use of it. He took me to my first provincial trial, where I played in boxers because I couldn't afford rugby shorts. Soon, I found myself on the provincial team, heading to tournaments to play the game I loved more than anything.

When I was 19, I became a professional. In 2012, on the same weekend of my 21st birthday, I played my first game with the South African national team.

Having the chance to play in the 2015 Rugby World Cup was a huge privilege, but I only played 30 minutes of it. Four years later, as captain of the Springboks, I was incredibly honored and excited to represent my country in the World Cup. I know I was chosen to be a captain of this team — the highest position one can achieve in this sport — for the person I am. Therefore, I try to remain true to who I am, not letting little things get into my head. I try to be a good example to others when I play.

God has been preparing me for such a time as this. While I grew up going to church with my grandmother, and went off and on the past few years, it wasn't until recently that I truly gave my life to Christ. While struggling with a lot of things personally — temptations, sins and lifestyle choices — I realized I wasn't living according to what I was calling myself: a follower of Christ. I was getting by, but I hadn't decided to fully commit myself to Jesus Christ and start living according to His way.

That is, until something I was struggling with in my personal life was exposed to the public. Up to that point, everything I was fighting against was hidden, but when my sin was exposed, I knew I either had to change my life, or lose everything. I decided to lose my life and find it in Christ.

Walking alongside a spiritual mentor, I've been able to discover the truth and saving power of Christ in a whole new way. This new life has given me a peace in my heart I'd never experienced before. Now that I have given everything to God, nothing else affects me. I now live and play with the freedom of knowing His plan will always happen, and at the end of the day, that's all I care about!

I don't have to understand everything in life, and there are so many things I don't, but I know God is in control of it all. My job is to do the best I can and leave the rest in His hands. While I was really struggling in the midst of my sin, I read a verse in the book of Isaiah in the Bible that really stood out to me. Isaiah 43:2-3 says, "When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and when you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned; the flames will not set you ablaze. For I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior." I read it over and over, for days.

If God can come through for countless people throughout history who had their backs against the world, He can do the same for me.

# A S F O R U I T C H A



ARIEL  
ORTEGA

SERVING  
A MIGHTY  
GOD



While playing professionally in his home country of Argentina, football player **Ariel Ortega** read that Japan held the highest rate of youth suicide for 12-15-year-olds in the world. God brought a sadness to Ortega's heart.

As a child, his mother had taught him the truth from the Bible in the Old Testament in the book called Joshua, chapter one verse nine, in which God says, "Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged, for the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go."

Ortega knew from reading the Bible that God used ordinary people if they were available to go. Ortega felt God wanted him to leave his homeland and for football to be a bridge to the hearts and needs of the Japanese youth. All he had to offer was his football skills. So he moved to Yokohama, Japan, and became Ortega-san. Here's his story.



AP Photos/Natacha Pisarenko

FAVORITE  
VERSE

"Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged, for the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go." — Joshua 1:9



I didn't speak any Japanese. There wasn't a football field waiting to be used for a football school. I packed up my family, believing that we were to be strong and courageous. In Christ, we serve a strong and mighty God who would make a miracle possible. We found a church in Yokohama that had weeds covering the playground in the back of the property. There was no grass, just a dusty field. As the pastor and I spoke, we shared the common dream of what is today called the Esperanza Soccer Club.

The young Japanese players work hard and are disciplined, as the training is strict. I've grown to love the Japanese youth and they love me. We are working to raise up players for the top Japanese clubs and for the national team. Step by step, we have been able to have the field covered with grass, where the youth can run freely and happily. And through our hard work, the facilities continue to improve.

We put our faith into action and a dream became a reality. We realized sports — whether football, basketball, cricket, etc. — are the languages of the world. Sportspeople like me have a bridge we can utilize by coaching, impacting and serving the youth. The early believers in Christ were men and women who traveled and served. This example is what our Argentinian coaching staff has done to serve in Japan.

The youth players are taught there is a mighty God who wants them to grow closer to Him and grow as persons. I just talk to the youth about my life, what I do and what the Bible says. If God wants to change hearts and some understand that Christ is Lord, that is God's role, not mine. We do want them to know there is a mighty God, and that in the most difficult times of their lives they can call on God. If the Japanese youth grow as players but not as persons, what we are doing here is meaningless.

I know the football school is significant because God does great and mighty things in each of our lives if we are open to His work.

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## **GOSPEL MESSAGE**

Becoming a Christ-follower and understanding Christ wasn't an automatic thing, it was a choice I had to make for myself. I made that choice to ask God into my life and have a relationship with Him.

None of us are perfect. We don't put God first in our life most of the time. That breaks our relationship with our Creator. But when we hear the name of Jesus and understand that's how God gave us the opportunity to come back to Him — through believing that God sent His Son, Jesus, to die on the cross and take away all the wrong stuff we've ever done — we can restore that broken relationship. We still mess up every day, but having a relationship with Jesus, and having Him in my life, changes everything.

I wanted to be right with God, so I prayed, "Jesus come into my life." That was the start of my perspective on life, and that carried into my sport. My faith has been something that has given me such a grounding and sustained me through the crazy world of sport. Would you pray the same prayer?

— Debbie Flood, three-time Olympic rower from Great Britain



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