

If you've ever watched a great athlete, they sometimes seem to make how they play a game look flawless. But the reality is of course that athletes, like all of us, go through highs and lows. To get to the top of their game took incredible effort. But just because they climbed the mountain to get to the top of the career, it didn't mean the work ended. Far from it. Indeed, most all go through periods of struggle and wonder how on earth they can become among the best at what they do.

One such man is Otis Birdsong, who's playing days are long over, but who was a four time NBA all star who played in the late 1970s and through the 1980s. But with a little bit of advice, some soul searching and hard work, he realized that slumps don't last forever.

In a reflection he wrote on one of his worst slumps, he points out how we all go through them at some time in life, there are days, even weeks when the whole world seems stacked against us. We fret, we worry, we scramble for solutions, and still the slump goes on. He was through a slump like that—and he licked it in a way that took him by surprise.

During the 1979-80 basketball season, he was stuck in what had to be the worst dry spell of his career, and so was the team he played for then, the Kansas City Kings (now the Sacramento Kings). He had been named to the All-Star team, and his team had won the Midwest Division of the NBA the year before, and everyone expected the same again. But they got off to a miserable start, winning only five of 14, falling seven games off the lead.

Nothing Otis did on the court was going right. After averaging 22 points per game the year before, even good shots were now rolling off the rim. Passes would slip through his hands, causing critical turnovers; opponents he'd be covering on defense would easily get by him. He watched endless films with coaches, analyzing every move he made on the court, and looked for some fundamental skill gone sour. He even prayed about it, every day, but the situation just got worse.

One afternoon Otis was pacing in his apartment, about as low as he'd ever been. He says he should have been thinking about the game that night, but frankly, he didn't even want to play. His confidence was totally shot. It just wasn't fun being embarrassed night after night.

On impulse he picked up the telephone and began dialing. One-eight-one-three... Even the ring of the phone sounded gloomy.

"Hi, Mom," he said when a voice came on the other end of the line.

"Otis, what's the matter? You sound glum."

"Well, Mom, things still aren't going so well. I'm still not playing well, and..."

“You’re not injured, are you?”

“No.”

“How about the rest of the team? Is everyone healthy?”

“Well, yeah.”

“You’ve been praying, and keeping up on your Bible reading?”

“Sure have.”

“Then I don’t see what the problem is. Otis, you know what I’ve always told you when you’ve had problems, don’t you?”

“Of course. ‘Trust in the Lord with all your heart...’ But, Mom, this is a really bad slump—I’m playing terrible. I’ve been praying about it for ten games now, and it’s only gotten worse.”

“Listen, Otis, I’ve been through tough times myself, and as a matter of fact, you were the cause of some of them.”

“Me?”

“Yes, you. All of those years of trying to bring you up right. Now that was tough!”

Mom laughed, and so did Otis. She said, “Otis, you’re not trusting in the Lord. You’re doubting Him. Come on, son, get back to believing!”

When Otis hung up the phone, he couldn’t help but shake his head at the thought that he was one of my mother’s worst problems. But he reflected, he probably was.

His father, Nathaniel Birdsong, died when Otis was nine, leaving mom to raise 12 children in their little house in Winter Haven, Florida. Soon after Dad died, she sat us all down in the living room. “All right, we’re on our own now,” she said. “That means we’ll have to pull together; it’ll mean chipping in the money you make picking grapefruit in the grove. But you’re going to have a good home and get a good education. We’re going to trust in the Lord for that.”

Mom was always after Otis to study his books more, but he just wanted to play ball. About every day, his brother Norris and Otis would be out back, shooting basketballs through the old barrel hoop tacked up to a telephone pole. Every day, that is, except Sunday. That was the day Mom had every one of the Birdsongs in church, whether we wanted to be there or not.

Mom and Otis didn't always see eye to eye on that. He loved to stay out late on Saturday nights with friends, and the last thing he wanted was to get up early on Sunday morning for church and Sunday school. But Mom's rule was ironclad: "If you can stay out late on Saturday, you surely can get up early on Sunday for church."

She did a lot of talking to her kids about the Lord, and to the Lord about them. Otis writes that life wasn't easy for her—she had to go out and work in other people's homes, all the while trying to keep the 12 kids in school and out of trouble. He caused her a lot of grief, like the night she told him to stay home but he went riding on my bicycle anyway, then fell and broke his wrist. When the kids did things like that, his mom would sit down with them and read to them from the Bible. They knew then she was disappointed.

Eventually that old basketball hoop in the backyard paid off in ways that surprised even Mom. Otis won a basketball scholarship to the University of Houston. One night before he left for Texas, Mom handed him a box. "For you," she said, "from the lady I work for. It's your birthday present."

Carefully he tore the end off the brown cardboard box, and pulled out a beautiful Bible. "When you're away at school—I want you to read this," Mom said. "It's the best present you'll ever receive. Ever."

Otis paged through that same Bible now, dog-eared and worn from the years of use he'd given it since then. "Come on, son," Mom had said, "get back to believing." Mom was right. Otis knew he had talent as a player. He had strong health. He just had to go on believing in myself—and in Him.

That night, against Detroit, Otis went into the game feeling different. He got the opening tip-off from the center, Sam Lacey, and quickly dribbled up the right side of the floor. Fifteen feet from the basket, a Piston guard challenged him, cutting off his route to the hoop. So Otis pulled up and let go with a jump shot. Swish!

Quickly he backpedaled on defense, and when they forced a Detroit player to take a bad shot and got the rebound, he raced up the floor again. Phil Ford hit him with a perfect pass on the run—it was an easy lay-up. All night long his shots continued to fall, even the off-balance one he threw up in the third quarter. His passing was crisp and true—no more of those costly turnovers. On defense he seemed to have regained that lost step; opponents weren't getting the easy shot off of him anymore.

Otis scored 35 points that night, one of the best games of his pro career. The next night he got 32 points against Boston, and had a 36-point game the next week in a win over San Diego. And the team started winning, too—24 of 31 during one stretch. Otis beat the slump, and went on that season to earn All-Pro honors.

He closes by reflecting that It's a funny thing about moms. They don't have to know a thing about jump shots and zone defenses to know a lot about slumps. And the faith that sees you through them.

Life deals us all slumps. We struggle with sin only to seemingly beat it and fall down again. Troubles happen at work or school. Family issues come up. Or it seems like we have times where we can't do anything right. But this week's readings remind us that faith sees us through.

Abraham has been promised by God he would have children and many descendants. But while God has protected Abraham in Egypt, and brought him victory in the land of Canaan, the promise has yet to be fulfilled. In the Gospel, Peter, James and John go with Jesus up the mountain and get a glimpse of Jesus in his glorified body; but they also have to go down the mountain and will have much suffering to go through the rest of their lives. And in the second reading, Paul talks of his own spiritual journey which has included persecution, imprisonment, shipwreck, and so much suffering, but gives us the hope that our citizenship is in heaven.

Our citizenship is in heaven too. But sometimes it can be hard to keep our eyes fixed on the goal. Even in the case of Otis, while was trying to get out of his slump on the court, deep down he knew his call was to be a Christian as his mother had taught him. So how can we get through the slumps of life? How do we find hope when life is hard?

For one, we must remember what Otis' mother taught him and that's to turn to God. Note what Abraham does. To calm Abraham's fears, God turns to the ritual of covenant. A common covenant ceremony in the ancient world involved placing portions of slaughtered animals opposite each other. People would then walk between the divided portions to demonstrate how seriously they regarded the terms of the agreement. In this reading the smoking pot of fire and the flaming torch represent God passing between the dead animals. This covenant ritual should be proof enough to a doubting Abraham that God's word is entirely reliable. And Peter, James and John are given a glimpse of the future. On another mountain come the Ascension, they will be told remember, I am with you always until even the end of the ages. So we must remember, when we sin and struggle, God is there with His mercy. When we hurt, we look to the Cross and remind ourselves God suffered to like we do, and that he is with us still here which we celebrate with the anointing and the Eucharist. God might not give us the answer we always want, and sometimes we can inevitably wonder where He is, but just as He journeys down the mountain with Peter, James and John, he journeys with us through our lives too. We should never fear turning to Him no matter what we are going through.

Secondly, we need patience. Understandably we can want instant results. But with patience, Abraham's dreams were realized. With patience, Peter, James and John became saints. Lent gives us a great time to think about what we have to do to go back up the mountain and help others to do so too, the one that leads to heaven. We must be patient with ourselves knowing we are human and make mistakes. When we are trying

to help others it's so important to be patient with them too, encouraging them on and never giving up.

Third, we need to rely on others for our journey. Peter, James and John would rely on one another and others to continue their mission. Otis relied on his mother to give him some inspiration and help. God in His wisdom gives us people to help us, to inspire us and to encourage. There are so many people whom we call "friends" these days, but real friends are far fewer. These are the people who will encourage but also challenge and give us the straight story. People who will pray for us but also help us when we need it, and help us help ourselves. When I think about my vocation, so many people have and continue to help me from other priests to friends to my parents and the amazing staff I work with. Think of the mission of our Church and parish, to save souls and bring them to God. Each of us on staff and in the parish has different gifts that we pool for that mission. On our own personal journeys, we need to seek out the people who help us and not think we can do it all alone.

Fourth, we count our blessings. Abraham already had God come through for Him. And He will again. Sometimes though when we mess up, or when life gets us down, we can forget all the good things that we have been blessed with and that God has already done for us. As I shared once before, I once interviewed Mary Jackson who did a lot of charity work in the Washington DC area and is an accomplished pianist. She lost her husband to Lou Gehrig's disease, has had a myriad of health issues, and nearly lost two of her kids. But she is still going strong, and when I asked her about her mindset about how she keeps going on, she said she gives thanks for the simple blessings; another day of life; the air she breathes; the fact that she is just alive. She considers herself greatly blessed. Sometimes it can help to write down things and keep a running list to look at, especially if we are in a slump, and see all that God has done.

Lastly, while we can't do it alone, we also need to be introspective and realize we have so much talent. Eric Liddell, the runner from "Chariots of Fire" who was killed in World War II, said "God made me fast. And when I run, I feel His pleasure." On the treadmill the other day I made it to 4 miles in 15 minutes. I tried to crank it up a bit but I'm not as fast as I was 12 years ago, and I never really was all that fast to begin with. God did not make me fast, but He made me, and He has a plan for me. Others can help me, but ultimately I have to discover and use what God has given me to continue my journey.

Hopefully so far this Lent, you've asked yourself a question: where am I going? And hopefully you've come to the realization that you want to get to heaven, which is why you are here this morning. The road to get there is long, and we'll have many slumps along the way. But ultimately we can get there where we won't have to set up tents for a temporary stay, but will be forever with the love of God. So see that love in your lives. Realize God is with you every step of the way. And use that love to transform yourselves by not getting down or thinking short-term when the inevitable setbacks come, but keeping your eyes fixed on the goal, the crown of eternal life, which we can obtain through the love of God, the support of one another, and by believing in ourselves as God believes in us.