

Sometimes sports fans will debate who the greatest athlete is in a particular sport, and there usually never is a correct answer. For instance in baseball some may focus on power others on batting average or others on pitching. In football is it the quarterback or the running back or the guys who give the running back a hole to run through or the linebacker who sacks the quarterback with ease?

You also when you watch interviews might find athletes talk about who they think is the greatest, but more often than not what I've found is that among those at the top of their game, in interviews, they will often talk more about family that helped them get there, or the team nature that helped them to win a championship.

And then there are the other things too that personify greatness. Among them being a player who isn't focused so much on their own glory, but on the deeper things one can learn in life and from competition.

In Wisconsin, a few years back, there was a young woman who gained notoriety for doing just this. Winning medal after medal, but showing those who knew her what true leadership was and what mattered most.

The young woman's name was Lisa Kincaid.

Michael Powers was a volleyball coach.

And he looks at his experience with her an eye opening experience.

He writes that at the professional level, some athletes developed the attention seeking me-first attitude that was cultivated from a "win at all cost" upbringing. And he admits you sometimes see this in high school and junior high as well. And this is perhaps because the truly greatest aren't ones to flaunt their greatness, but rather use it to make the others around them better rather than focusing on themselves.

Michael first met Lisa on the volleyball court as she played for a rival high school in the conference where he coached. Many times he says he was on the opposing sidelines and could only watch in awe at her athleticism. The speed of a cheetah, the mental toughness of a veteran and a thirty-two-inch vertical jump - unheard of for a high school girl, and at the time she was only a sophomore.

Starting her junior year, he was fortunate enough he says to coach Lisa on a USA Junior Olympic Volleyball team, and it was during those two years that he and his wife grew to love and respect her - respect her not only for her many athletic achievements, but also for her unselfishness and humility to those around her in the face of the many honors bestowed upon her. Besides being one of the most coachable athletes he'd ever had, Michael says she was the epitome of a team player and went out of her way to be humble.

If anyone had a right to be cocky or proud of herself it was Lisa, he says. Besides being one of the best volleyball and basketball players in Wisconsin, she became a track legend. She went to 64 consecutive conference meets without losing any event. She made trips to the state finals all four years she was in high school, and she came away with six state titles. Many times she was the lone representative at the state competition for her team, and would single handedly place her high school as high as third.

Never once though did she brag about her accomplishments. In fact, she felt uncomfortable talking about her achievements and would usually steer the conversation away from her and to the performances of her younger sisters or other teammates. Besides coaching her in volleyball, Michael was able to see her at many track meets, as his video production company was hired to produce track videos for other high schools in the conference. He saw many instances where she would lend her shoes to someone who'd forgotten her own, or slow down at the end of a race to finish up stride for stride with her sister, both of them smiling from ear to ear as they crossed the finish line together. He also vividly remembered Lisa going up to an athlete from a different team and wishing her a happy birthday. The young lady's face just beamed as she told Lisa of her birthday plans for later that night. He was smiling as he walked away, because he happened to know that day was Lisa's birthday too, but never once did she mention it to a competitor.

Even with all these accomplishments and displays of sportsmanship, one particular track meet during Lisa's junior year stood out for Micheal for the way she impressed upon him what is still good about sports today.

It was a nonconference meet late in the year, and Lisa's coach told her he needed her to run a mile. Lisa had never done so, but agreed to do what was best for the team.

Lisa easily outdistanced the competition, but on the last lap she seemed to grow tired. Two athletes from the other team passed her, and then so did her teammate, whom Micheal called Jane though that wasn't her actual name. Lisa managed to stay just behind her teammate and cross the finish line at her heels.

Lisa lost an event for the first time in her track career.

But, could she have actually won the event? Maybe, thinks Micheal.

But Lisa was focused on something else.

Michael notes that in Lisa's track program, athletes needed to earn a set amount of points to gain a varsity letter. Lisa knew that Jane, a senior, needed to finish at least third to earn a letter which would be her first ever letter. Lisa also knew that the two athletes on the other team were most likely going to beat Jane, if they ran anywhere near the times they had been running all year, but that barring an injury during the race, Jane was a lock to finish third - until that is the coach entered Lisa in the event.

Lisa remembered all this as she lined up for the start of that race. Michael had wondered why she wore a slight smile on her face after having “lost” for the first time ever. And so after four years of working hard, Jane finally received her first varsity letter and helped her team win the meet.

As for Lisa, on that day, she lost, but Michael says earned even more of his respect and admiration as the role model this generation sorely needs.

Glory, honor, power, recognition. So often we seek it out. Some become obsessed with it to their own ruin or the harm of many others, like Hitler or Napoleon or Stalin. For others it becomes this lust that leads them to focus on themselves, sometimes causing them to gossip and slander and manipulate and walk over others to obtain. But for people like Lisa, they see something deeper. Namely that power and honor aren't something to be preoccupied with, but rather we use our gifts for the service of others as a servant-leader.

James and John this week ask Jesus for honor - can we sit at your right and left. The others aren't too happy but they are sort of jealous too. It comes across a little bit worse than it sounds; James and John see Jesus as the Messiah and ask to be in glory with Him. But Jesus, as we know from the first reading, is a suffering servant. His throne will be the wood of the cross. James and John will also suffer greatly for the Gospel too. And they will learn what this servant-leadership looks like as Jesus tells them to be the servant of others. Something Lisa Kincaid seemed to get, and hopefully something we get as well.

As for how we grow in this ability, there's a few things we can do.

It starts by reminding ourselves we do things for God's glory, not our own. Our primary focus should be to make a difference for the better as a person of hope, whether we are making a donation of money or our time; volunteering; or doing something for others. There's nothing wrong with a little recognition for a job well done, but this can't be the main reason we do a charitable act. Rather our actions should hopefully be done because we want to truly want to help the person and make this world a better place.

Second, we can look at how we are doing in that regard. Sometimes jealousy or envy can creep in. Again, if I were a runner (obviously not with this body!), I'd want to win the blue ribbon. I do compete in photography competitions, and I want to win. But I also congratulate others in the club competitions, and get out when I can to shoot with others. Are we willing to learn from others that are better than us or ask for help? Do I relinquish control when warranted? Do we rejoice with others when they succeed at something we also do? Or do we get a little envious or, even worse, try to cut others down and see them as a competitor? Think of the 80s film from my generation Karate Kid, now a spin off of Cobra Kai, the way of sportsmanship vs. “sweeping the leg” or winning at any cost. In other versions of this Gospel Jesus holds a young child in the midst of the apostles and says they have to change and become like a child; His point being power and honor can become drugs. And if these things we see creeping up in

our lives, we need to get away from them. A boss maybe recognizes they are too much of a micromanager; a parent realizes they maybe need to let go more; a teacher or coach realizes they've become too stubborn or set in their ways, etc. The list goes on and on.

And third, are we willing to suffer as a servant? Lisa had plenty of suffering - the constant work and practices. But there was also a bit of suffering in not winning a race she probably could have won. But she saw something deeper there. Remember Jesus enters into His glory on Good Friday from the Cross. Who is at His left and right? The two criminals. We don't seek suffering out for sufferings' sake, but it is a part of life. I think of our principal and the teachers for instance who serve at our school; despite Covid's presence and it impacting our school last year and now this year, they come in and are willing to deal with that, along with the suffering that comes with the lesson preparation, a few parents who may want to micromanage, students who may be a challenge. They serve though with a great attitude and suffer. To that you can add the police, the firefighters, the nurses, the parents who do so much for their kids, the parish staff coming together and working hard as we're currently short staffed, and many other vocations. As once heard in a homily, we all want to get to Easter, but there is no detour around Good Friday. So we should ask ourselves am I willing to suffer for my family, my country, my God? When we do, just as Good Friday led to Easter, we too can bring about such hope in the world.

What James and John learn, and what Lisa also knew, is that being a disciple means being a servant. Lisa helped her teammate get a letter. Far more more important than that is getting to heaven. We can help one another do that by being one with the Suffering Servant, saying "yes" to God wherever He calls us to go, and knowing that while it might entail suffering and few might know about our sacrifices, what an incredible difference we will make. Momentarily, we will hear Jesus' command to "Do this in memory of me." A meal where we celebrate His real presence, but also a demand to be like Him, a suffering servant who seeks not to be served but to serve, and not glory for Himself but rather to help us know what true love is all about. In so many ways, from a track meet one day in Wisconsin, to the acts of love and mercy we do for one another, we can do just that. So let us take seriously what Jesus tells us to do and make love and service truly a way of life for the Glory of God.