

To quote Frank Sinatra from "That's Life," "You're riding high in April, shot down in May, but I know I'm gonna change that tune, when I'm back on top in June."

All of us know what it's like to go through that. The problem can be sometimes once we get shot down, it can be hard to get back on top. A person can retreat inward, or blame God, others, everyone but themselves, or wallow in self pity and anger. However, what we just might find is that with a bit of patience knowing God has plans, and with a bit of effort too on our part to bring about growth over time, eventually amazing things can happen.

In 1968, a young man fresh out of college named Bob Hoppenstedt took a job teaching and coaching at Saint Bernard's, a Catholic high school in Illinois, the same high school he had attended. Compared to the schools that surrounded theirs, they were fairly small with two to three thousand students. His first year Bob served as an assistant coach with the football and basketball teams; during the spring, he was in charge of the track program.

They had a phenomenal year. Their football team won 10 games, finishing the season undefeated. Their basketball team won 21 games, losing only 5. They emerged as conference champions in both sports.

Being young and naive, Bob didn't recognize what extraordinary athletes they had that year. By the next fall, 14 of their former students would be playing college football - four with major scholarships. Two others would be running track for Division I universities. In 25 years of coaching after that, Bob said he never encountered a more gifted group.

Yet the student who made the greatest impression on all of them wasn't one of those promising young men. Physically this athlete he says was as different from them as a donkey from a thoroughbred. His name was Bobby Colson, and his impact, Bob said, would last the rest of his life.

Bobby was the freshman brother of their star two-mile runner, Mark Colson. Early in the season, Bobby stopped Bob in the school hallway. At 5'3" and 175 pounds, Bob said he looked more like the model for the Pillsbury Dough Boy. He told Bob that he'd been doing some serious thinking about joining the track team and he believed he could make an important contribution. He added that he didn't know in what events he could help, but he was confident that he had something to offer. Bob was impressed by his presentation and self-confidence.

Given his physique, the logical role for Bobby was the "weight man" - an athlete who specializes in shot-put and discus throwing. But they quickly encountered a setback: even though Bobby's 175 pounds was a lot of weight for a freshman, he didn't have an ounce of visible muscle. Not only was he unable to put (throw) the shot, he could barely pick it up.

Undaunted, Bobby proceeded with Coach Bob to the discus area. Bob notes a discus is considerably lighter than a shot, so immediately they were off to a good start. Bob coached him in the proper grip, delivery and release. Things seemed to be going fairly well. On command, Bobby would assume a wide stance, bend his knees, spread his fingers, bring his arm back and forth three times and let fly.

Well, that is most of the time he'd let fly. Every few tries though, he'd forget to let go, or he'd start to run right out of the circle, holding the discus in front of him in his pudgy little mitt. Whenever he actually released the discus, he would quickly spread out the measuring tape to see if his throw challenged the freshman-sophomore school record of 131 feet. Finding he had more than 110 feet to go didn't seem to faze him.

They decided Bobby might see greater results by adding the spinning technique to his discus endeavors. They stayed after the official close of practice to review the required footwork dozens of times. Coach Bob even drew footprints on the circle to show Bobby exactly where to step. Bobby was incredibly persistent and extremely coachable. Bob began to wish that all his athletes shared that same attitude.

The moment came to give the new technique a try. It was a sight to behold. Once Bobby got to spinning, Bob notes he resembled a human centrifuge about to explode. He was still twirling when the discus flew out of his hand and landed 27 feet in the opposite direction from where they had intended. After Bob got Bobby to stop turning, he staggered around like a wounded water buffalo for a few minutes, looking as if he might throw up. Then he rushed to measure his latest effort - that's how Bob knew it was exactly 27 feet.

Bobby felt very encouraged by this outcome, but Bob didn't think the season was long enough to get his technique to the point where they were not endangering lives - Bobby's own included. After a bit of smooth talking on his part, Bobby agreed that they should maybe investigate another event. The long jump seemed like a possibility; the only problem was, Bobby couldn't make it to the landing pit from the takeoff board. They quickly eliminated the pole vault, high jump, hurdles and triple jump. Bobby wasn't blessed with a lot of foot speed, so sprints and relays also went by the wayside. When they ended the session, Coach Bob was at a loss for what to suggest for the following day's practice.

As it turned out, Bobby made his decision with Coach Bob. The next morning, he informed the coach that he was going to be a two-miler like his brother, Mark. Coach Bob knew Bobby idolized Mark, who was not only an outstanding two-miler but also an outstanding person and team leader.

Coach Bob admired Bobby's enthusiasm, but to himself he questioned whether the two-mile race was a good choice. Yet Bobby was determined, and for the next two weeks, he painfully but gamely struggled through his workouts.

Their first meet was a “triangular” between Saint Basil’s, Notre Dame, and Saint Bernards. In those days, the two mile race was the first running event at each meet. Because of the length of the event, both the frosh-soph and varsity teams ran at the same time; the younger runners wore their shirts inside out to identify their level. Field events all started at the same time as well.

So there they were, with the two-mile well underway. At the varsity level, they were set to finish first and third. Mark Colson launched another memorable season by setting a new conference record.

Then, there was Bobby. Every team has one or two slow frosh-soph runners Bob notes, but next to Bobby, all of them looked like sprinters. When all the other runners had finished, Bobby still had three laps to go. The host team started putting hurdles on the track for the next event. Coach Bob yelled at them to leave one lane open so Bobby could finish the race.

As Bobby completed his first of his remaining laps, Coach Bob could see tears on his cheeks. He didn’t realize it, but several boys from other squads had started calling him names and making fun of him. Only their high jumper, Pat Linden, knew what was happening. He left the high-jump area and stationed himself at the far curve to shout words of encouragement to Bobby.

Meanwhile other athletes continued to ridicule Bobby, shouting at him to get off the track. Coach Bob could see that Bobby was crying more noticeably at this point, but he kept going. And a few more of Saint Bernard’s varsity team members noticed Pat’s absence and went to join him in urging Bobby on.

During Bob’s many years of coaching since then, he’s seen top athletes walk off the track when they knew they weren’t going to win a race. Usually they developed a pulled hamstring or something of that nature - though often Bob thought the injury was more to the spirit than the body. Bobby, in contrast, never once considered leaving that two-mile race, grueling as it plainly was for him. Once he started, quitting was not an option.

After he finished the race, Bobby went from event to event encouraging his teammates. When one of the team took a first place, Bobby got more excited than the winner.

A few days later, they had their second triangular meet, with Holy Cross and Saint Patrick’s. The scenario in the two mile was much the same as before, except this time all their athletes left their respective areas to urge Bobby on. The whole team was lined up around the track, clapping and cheering for Bobby as tears coursed down his face. Bob reflects that it was a moving sight to see.

By their third triangular meet, at Bergon High School, word had spread about Bobby. This time their team members weren’t the only ones rooting for him - all the other teams were there too, filling the straightaways as well as the curves.

At the end of the season, the varsity team purchased a large trophy for Bobby and had it inscribed: To Bobby Colson - Our Most Courageous Athlete, Saint Bernard's Track Team 1968.

Looking back, Coach Bob says Bobby was right when he told him that he could make a significant contribution to their track efforts. He had joined a good team and made it into a great family. His example helped the team to all understand that talent is God given and we should be thankful, but conceit is self given and we should be careful.

They did not find out until late that summer, but Bobby had a rare form of leukemia and passed on the following summer. But what he did with what he was given changed the lives of Bob and those other kids, because Bobby never stopped running.

As we all know, life can be very hard. And on the race of life, there are probably moments like Coach Bob describes, where we are running but then want to walk off the track. But when we take a page from Bobby, and never give up, what will happen? The answer is in our first reading: the desert and the parched land will exult; the steppe will rejoice and bloom. They will bloom with abundant flowers, and rejoice with joyful song. Leukemia took Bobby's body, but it could not touch his soul. And because he refused to give up, he not only finished the races he ran, but he finished the race of life and won the eternal crown and helped others to do the same.

This third week of Advent, we have this imagery of the desert in our first reading, but the desert is not without life - for indeed there will be a bloom. But, as we hear in the second reading, this requires patience too. So what are we to do about it? I'd suggest namely 3 things: first, being patient, knowing that things don't change over night; second, going into the desert and using the desert as kind of a training ground for us to become the person we want to become, and third, helping others to achieve this transformation too.

With respect to the first part, patience, how frustrating it is when we don't see results right away. We want to make changes but fall back into old habits. Our goals don't seem to be realized. Or perhaps this is the case with people we are trying to help; they just don't seem to figure it out and will they ever? The answer is that we need to realize that things don't just get handed to us; they take time. And in this time of training, which we see in Biblical figures like Moses and Paul and Abraham and so many others, and even in superhero movies where the hero learns how to use his gifts, we can get clarity to what God wants us to do. And so as I shared last week, make time to go into the desert regularly to discern God's will, and be patient - knowing that answers take time to discern, and God will work with you over time to achieve the results you are looking for.

But here's the thing too: like Bobby, we have to keep running the race. The young man never gave up, even though it was clear to all he was not a star athlete. He knew God called him to join the team because he could make a difference, and so he kept going to practice, trying different things, and kept on running. The question for you and me is how are we going to transform ourselves working with God? The psychologist Jordan

Peterson, a best-selling author of self-help books talks a lot about this, saying we all can come up with a list of so many stupid things we do that we need to stop doing. Our problem is as humans we play the blame game - we get angry at the world, our parents, our kids, the boss. Things don't work out like a test we bomb in school or something at work, and a person can become bitter. But maybe in life, a setback is the best thing that ever happened to us. Maybe like Bobby, who didn't beat himself up when he was obviously struggling and walk away but worked harder, and became the best version of himself he could, we can do the same thing. We can either wallow in shame or self-pity, or get back up. We can say yes I made a mistake, I'm going to confess it and work harder. We can say I've messed up here; the life I am living is not who is the real me, and I'm making poor choices. I can't fix the past, but I can work on the future and doing what I need to do to get my spiritual house in order. Or I've discerned God's called me to this and it's so hard to do this job as a parent, or to study, or to do this job, or to get in shape and better my health, or to talk about my faith when so many seem to not care, but even if it is hard, I'm going to keep on doing it and run those miles. It's not easy - life isn't. But God calls us all to run to win - however getting there like Bobby did requires constant practice and training. As Dr. Peterson notes in life, when we confront an obstacle maybe the obstacle isn't so much an obstacle but an opportunity, and the strong person is one who confronts it knowing we can't cling to a safe space, but that God calls us to go on an adventure - often through the desert - but ultimately we can emerge so much stronger.

And lastly, listen to what Jesus tells us in the Gospel. We are to tell others of what we see and hear. Do we see God in our lives and His love? Do we realize that we can do so much to help others run the race too? The problem is sometimes we see people as competitors, even our own teammates if you will. Dr. Peterson notes a parent may fear their child succeeding more than they did and hold them down, or we can become envious and resentful of others in our families. How often at times in life we can be like those other runners from the other teams mocking Bobby. But then you have people like Bobby. He'd never be as fast as his big brother; he'd never win first place let alone anything from a purely stats-driven perspective. But he transformed his team, because he helped inspire and helped everyone else to become better. His joy came from seeing the team do well and others win. We need to spur our children on and remember their lives and dreams are their own and help them find their gifts. We need to not give up on that person who has lost their way in life morally or spiritually and keep praying for them (ideally with them too) and helping them to see that God loves them. We need to not back down from being willing to talk about our faith with others. And when someone is down on themselves or thinking they can't do it, we need to remind them that they are loved by God and have the ability to win the race because God gave it to them.

Christmas reminds us the desert will eventually bloom - the seed will finally yield its fruit. Maybe you don't see much blooming in your life at various points. Don't give up. Rather be patient, and keep training and believing in yourself, knowing that working with God, together you will cross the finish line.