

# McCALLIE

— HONOR TRUTH DUTY —



## Races, Medals, and Joy

Convocation Remarks

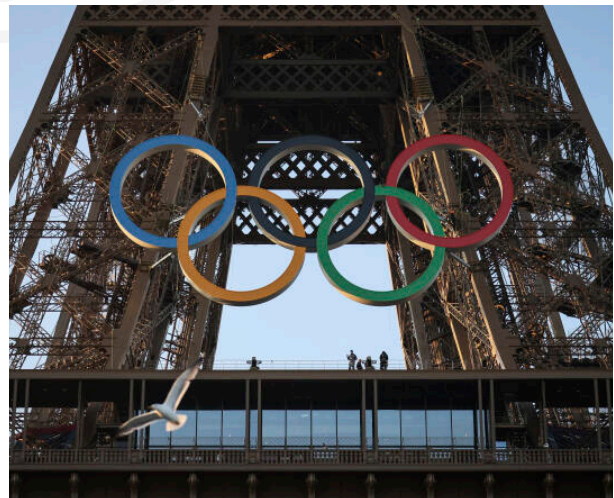
by Head of School Lee Burns '87

Wednesday, August 14, 2024

For the 120th time, boys, faculty, and staff assemble to begin a school year at the McCallie School. I extend a warm welcome to each of you, and especially to the many of you who are new this year to our family. We gather as 999 students from 24 states and 20 countries, and from 33 different elementary schools for our new 6th graders.

As I consider this momentous moment, I think about another gathering in recent days that brought together talented individuals from around the world: the Olympics in Paris. Perhaps you, like me, watched the amazing displays of diverse talents, carefully honed over years of disciplined work, intense training, and extraordinary coaching. Each athlete had his or her unique story, but they all shared a commitment to excellence and a spirit both of competition and camaraderie. They would each strive for the gold medal of course, but I appreciated the respect they displayed for their countries, for their competitors, and for the Olympic Games themselves.

As you sit here this morning, at the start of a new year—perhaps a new school, and, for many of you, a new city, even a new country—you may feel some of the same emotions that the Olympic athletes surely experienced as they prepared to compete. It's natural to feel excited and energized...and also nervous, even scared. Doubts may run through your head. *Do I have what it takes? Am I good enough? What if I fall or fail? Will I let other people down? How do I stack up and compare to others? Will others see me and care about me? Where will I be at the end of the race, the game, the year?*





As you prepare for this school year, for the adventure, for the race, I pose this question: what is your gold medal?

And why is that your gold medal?

100 years ago, the Olympics were also held in Paris. Two of the fastest runners in the world hailed from the United Kingdom. The 1981 Oscar winning movie “Chariots of Fire” recounts the remarkable story of these two men.

Harold Abrahams was a student at one of the world’s premier universities, Cambridge. The son of a very successful businessman, the younger brother of a doctor, he was driven, disciplined, and analytical, with cutting edge, precise training techniques from perhaps the best sprint coach in the world.

Eric Liddell, born in China as the son of missionaries, was raised in Scotland, where he ran along the grassy paths and green pastures with great passion but little training. He studied the Bible far more than running. He simply ran...because he loved to run.

Their backgrounds and approaches on their collision course for the gold medal in Paris could not have been more different. As portrayed in the movie, Abrahams ran fueled by a fear of losing and a need to prove himself worthy to his father. He ran to perform. He ran with pressure and pain, tight and stressed.

Eric Liddell, on the other hand, ran with a very unusual style: head tilted back, mouth open, huge smile animating his face. He was fluid and smooth and natural. He ran with joy. He tells his sister: “I believe God made me for a purpose, but he also made me fast. And when I run, I feel His pleasure.”

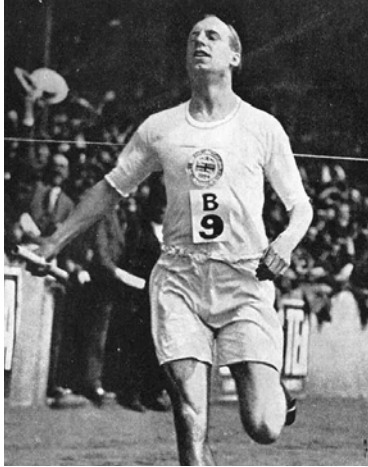
The 1924 Olympics, and the 2024 Olympics, both held qualifying heats to advance to the track finals. Abrahams and Liddell would surely advance to the finals, the way Noah Lyles and Kishane Thompson did last week. The race between them in the finals of the marquee event, the 100 meter dash, would be epic.

There was, however, a problem. The qualifying heat for Eric Liddell’s main event, the 100 meter dash, was to be held on Sunday, and as a Christian who devoutly followed the Sabbath practice of rest, Liddell didn’t train or compete on Sundays. He rested, prayed, read the Bible, and worshiped on Sundays. He was the original Chick-fil-A—closed on Sundays.

The Olympic committee sought to change his mind. So did British politicians and royals. He’d prepared for years for the race. Would he really forgo a potential gold medal on the world’s most prestigious stage?

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Liddell sat out the 100 meter dash. His morals were more important than his medals; his principles more than his performance.

Abrahams, on a training table before the race, is characteristically tense, discontent, perhaps even despondent, and says to a fellow runner: "I'm forever in pursuit, and I don't even know what I'm chasing...I'm scared. And now in one hour's time, I will be out there again. I will raise my eyes and look down that corridor: four feet wide, with ten lonely seconds to justify my whole existence. But will I?" Abrahams must win to be worthy. He placed enormous pressure on himself. Who he was was determined by what he did.

Liddell had a different purpose for his running: to experience God's pleasure. To enjoy Him. His perspective reminds me of our motto: man's chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy Him forever.



Eric Liddell's ultimate goal was not gold or earthly treasure. He found a more satisfying treasure, a deeper purpose and fulfillment elsewhere—in glorifying and enjoying God, in seeking God's Kingdom.

In Matthew 13:44, Jesus says that, "The kingdom of heaven is like a treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and covered up. Then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field."

Harold Abrahams does win the gold medal in the 100 meter dash in which Liddell did not compete. Liddell cheered him on.

Moved by the principled stand of Liddell, a teammate, Andrew Lindsay, gives up his spot in the finals later that week of the 400 meter race to Liddell so he could at least run in the Olympics. Though not a race for which his running style was well suited or which he would be expected to do well, Liddell wins the gold medal with his trademark, open-mouth, enormous smile radiating his joy in running.

In considering Liddell's priorities and unexpected win, I am reminded of Jesus saying in Matthew 6:33, "But seek ye first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things will be added to you."

As you prepare for the race set before you this year, I encourage you to reflect on why you are here. Is it simply to make good grades, win games, and get in a good college? Is it simply to impress other people, or simply to live up to their expectations? Is it just because you have to be here? Is it just to get the impressive credential of attending one of the country's leading schools? Is it just about you—your reputation, your performance, your fun, your future?

If that is all that it is, I believe that, while you may succeed like Harold Abrahams in the movie, you may not find joy or fulfillment along the way. Instead, you may find stress, exhaustion, and burnout.



I hope, this year, you will pursue something deeper than just the basics of school or good performances. I hope you will ponder who you really are and what your purpose is. You were each created, in God's image, with inherent dignity and worth, for a reason. You were created to enjoy God.

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McCallie can be a place of joy, exploration and discovery for each of you. Who are you, and what do you believe? We are a place to wrestle with ideas—big and small—and to develop, I hope, a love of learning—about yourself, the world, and God.

We are a place to foster habits within our hearts—habits of examination and integrity and sacrifice, of gratitude and rest and being present.

We are a school that seeks your wellness—that wants you to have balance and opportunities for renewal, reflection, and rest. We want you to pursue passions inside and outside the classroom, and to laugh and smile frequently.

We are a place to develop the impulse and practice to see our duties to others...to serve...to make a positive difference in the world.

We are a community of relationships and brotherhood...of supporting and encouraging each other...of listening carefully and empathetically to each other...of respecting differences as well as the common bonds we share.

We are a safe and supportive place to be yourself, an authentic you, and to share who you are. Be courageous in letting other people know who you are. Be open minded and open hearted in getting to know others well. Be present, in the moment with the people physically near you. Practice the perspective and skills of knowing people deeply as David Brooks writes in his book which we will be discussing throughout the year.

We as human beings are designed to be in relationships with each other. We flourish in relationships and starve without them. Devote yourself to developing and deepening relationships with your classmates, your brothers. They will be a source of strength and joy who will fortify you for the challenges of this year and your lives.

So too will your teachers, advisors, coaches, counselors, and all the adults here be a reservoir to build you up, encourage you, and support you.



You are blessed with a team, a family in fact, of remarkable and talented men and women who are here to guide you, mentor you, inspire you, challenge you, and love you. They are extraordinary life-coaches to foster your growth intellectually, spiritually, socially, emotionally, and physically. Trust them. Share your triumphs and struggles with them. Ask for their help. Be teachable and trainable.

Even more importantly and powerfully than your classmates and the faculty and staff, we have a loving and all-powerful God who sustains and strengthens us, who gives us purpose, who gives us dignity and worth, who frees us from the crippling pressure to perform, who forgives us when we fall or fail, and who has plans for us to flourish. I challenge you to get to know that God and experience the peace and joy He offers us.

As we begin this year, know that you have incredible resources, assets, and blessings. Because of that, you have what it takes. You are worthy. You are here for a reason. You are equipped. You are known and loved. You are strengthened. You can make mistakes. You can rest. Fear not.

Strive for a gold medal this year, yes, but strive for an even better medal than the ones based on the usual worldly metrics of performance. Even Olympic medals aren't the best and most enduring ones. May you medal in character and faith, in the ideals of honor, truth, and duty, in serving God and others, in standing up for principles, in knowing and supporting each other.

Run the race this year with confidence. With purpose. With pleasure. Like Eric Liddell, run it with a wide smile on your face. With joy.

Isaiah 40:31 in the Old Testament tells us: "But they who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles; they shall run and not be weary; they shall walk and not faint."

May we all run with that strength, with that resolve, with that energy, and with that joy.

May we soar like eagles.

