



The Oldest Competitor at U. S. Olympic Trials Wins

The Wired Word for the Week of June 30, 2024

In the News

The Olympic swimming world was stunned recently when a 46-year-old woman, Gabrielle Rose, who swam in the 1996 Olympics as an 18-year-old, beat seven other considerably younger women in the 100-meter breaststroke to make it into the semifinals.

The Washington Post reported that Rose, who posted a career-best time of 1 minute, 8.43 seconds, is at least seven years older than any other of the 1,007 swimmers who qualified for these Olympic trials and 33 years older than the youngest competitor at the trials in Indianapolis. On the day she won her heat to get to the semifinals, she was some 20 years older than the second-oldest swimmer competing against her and nearly 30 years older than the youngest.

Rose, of course, was thrilled, but seemed not especially surprised: "I feel so lucky to feel so young and so strong and to have this experience," said Rose, who added, "I don't really relate to 'oldest.'" Rose's 9-year-old daughter, Annie, was in the stands.

After we saw the Rose story, we began to see other examples of people doing things well after or well before most people would expect them to do them. All of this has raised questions about when and whether Christians should somehow "act their age," whatever that old phrase means, and how we can determine if we're being called to do extraordinary things given our age and our physical and mental

condition. So this TWW lesson will explore some of that in the context of Christian faith.

After her win in the 100-meter breaststroke, Rose advanced to the women's 200-meter breaststroke semifinals by winning her preliminary heat with a personal-best time of 2:30.13. But, in the end, she didn't swim fast enough in the finals for either of the breaststroke events to earn a spot on the U.S. team at the Olympic games in Paris, which open July 26.

The *Memphis Commercial Appeal* reported that Rose holds dual citizenship and competed for Brazil at the 1996 Olympics in Atlanta before competing for the United States at the 2000 Olympics in Sydney. She attended an Episcopal school in Memphis before becoming a 22-time All-American at Stanford University.

As the *Post* story noted, when she finished the 100-meter breaststroke heat in first place, the cheering for her "became a full-throated roar. Rose hung on the wall for more than a few seconds, her goggles hiding the tears welling up behind them. 'Just relief,' she said when asked what was going through her mind in those moments. 'I just wanted to have the swim I thought I was capable of.'

"As she walked across the pool deck to the athletes' tunnel, the crowd -- full of swim moms and swim dads of Rose's generation -- sustained its applause, with many rising to their feet in appreciation. Rose kept her left hand over her heart as she walked, as if struggling to keep it contained in her chest. 'I wasn't expecting how loud and awesome it was,' she said."

Rose is not the only person doing remarkable things at what is considered an advanced age for a particular sport or activity. Just last Sunday, for instance, Texas Rangers veteran pitcher Max Scherzer, who will turn 40 in late July, [pitched a winning 4-0 game](#) against the Kansas City Royals, giving up only one hit in his five innings of work.

Another example: Deanna Stellato-Dudek, who retired from figure skating in 2001, just returned to competition as a 40-year-old and became the oldest woman to win a World Figure Skating Championship.

And 90-year-old Ed Dwight, America's first Black astronaut candidate, last month finally rocketed into space for the first time -- 60 years after he first hoped to do that. Plus, none other than 52-year-old rapper Snoop Dogg joined Olympic runners recently on the track and [ran 200 meters](#) in a surprisingly fast 34.44 seconds. "Ain't bad," he said after he caught his breath.

At the other end of the age spectrum is Khaya Njumbe, who at age 15 got his bachelor's degree this past May from Indiana University Northwest while earning his high school diploma at the same time.

More on this story can be found at these links:

[The Oldest Competitor at the U.S. Trials Turns in the Swim of a Lifetime](#), *The Washington Post*

[Memphis' Gabrielle Rose, 46, Falls Short at Olympic Swimming Trials in 200 Breaststroke Semifinals](#), *Memphis Commercial Appeal*

[A 40-Year-Old Just Became the Oldest Woman to Win a World Figure Skating Championship. What She Wants Non-athletes to Know](#), *CNN*

[Ed Dwight, America's First Black Astronaut Candidate, Finally Goes to Space 60 Years Later](#), *The Associated Press*

[Indiana Teen, 15, Set to Become Youngest College Graduate in State's History: 'The Sky Is the Limit.'](#) *The New York Post*

Applying the News Story

Are there people in your congregation or community who are achieving goals usually associated with much younger or much older people? What motivates them? Might they have ideas that could motivate you? What if you helped arrange a gathering to celebrate the achievements of such people? And what if you try now to accomplish something you wish you had accomplished years ago?

The Big Questions

1. From what sources do you draw your strength to accomplish things you might at first think you're too old -- or too young -- to try to do? What, if any, role does your faith play as a motivator in such cases?
2. Do older achievers like Gabrielle Rose inspire you to try things you might not otherwise have tried? Or do you think such older over-achievers are simply trying to recapture their lost youth?
3. What have you personally achieved that friends or family thought you were too old or too young to accomplish? And why did you make the effort? Did ego play a part?
4. How do personal achievements such as those by Gabrielle Rose or Ed Dwight add to the common good and benefit the larger society? Or is that beyond their purpose?
5. The Bible has several stories of older people doing some remarkable things, such as Sarah having a baby when she thought it impossible because of age. What do you think we are to learn from such stories to apply to our lives today?

Confronting the News With Scripture and Hope

Here are some Bible verses to guide your discussion:

Genesis 5:25-27

When Methuselah had lived one hundred eighty-seven years, he became the father of Lamech. Methuselah lived after the birth of Lamech seven hundred eighty-two years and had other sons and daughters. Thus all the days of Methuselah were nine hundred sixty-nine years, and he died. (For context, read [Genesis 5:1-32](#).)

How do you read Bible stories that seem unbelievable to most 21st-century minds? The *Britannica* offers [this interpretation](#) about Methuselah's age: "His prodigious age has been taken as literally 969 solar years, as a possible mistranslation of 969 lunar months or tenths of years (with his age then ranging from about 78 years to almost 97 years), and as a myth intended to create an impression of a distant past between Adam and Noah, as well as any number of other interpretations."

Questions: Why should Methuselah's age matter to us today? And how much time should we spend worrying about our own age or using extraordinary means to try to extend it? What do you think you're already too old to accomplish, and what motivation do people like Gabrielle Rose offer to you for future achievements?

Genesis 18:9-15

They said to him, "Where is your wife Sarah?" And he said, "There, in the tent." Then one said, "I will surely return to you in due season, and your wife Sarah shall have a son." And Sarah was listening at the tent entrance behind him. Now Abraham and Sarah were old, advanced in age; it had ceased to be with Sarah after the manner of women. So Sarah laughed to herself, saying, "After I have grown old, and my husband is old, shall I be fruitful?" The Lord said to Abraham, "Why did Sarah laugh and say, 'Shall I indeed bear a child, now that I am old?' Is anything too wonderful for the Lord? At the set time I will return to you, in due season, and Sarah shall have a son." But Sarah denied, saying, "I did not

laugh," for she was afraid. He said, "Yes, you did laugh." (For context, read [Genesis 18:1-33](#).)

In Genesis 17, God promises 99-year-old Abram (later Abraham) a son and tells him he will be the "ancestor of a multitude of nations." Later, when Sarah (whose name had been changed from Sarai), Abraham's also-elderly wife, hears that she's to give birth, the news cracks her up.

Questions: Would you have laughed, too, if you'd been Sarah? Or do you simply believe that God is capable of keeping promises no matter how seemingly far-fetched they seem? If so, what has God promised that you and other Christians still are waiting to receive? For instance, what about the second coming of Christ, which the apostle Paul and some others of that era thought would happen very quickly?

Luke 2:41-47

Now every year his parents went to Jerusalem for the festival of the Passover. And when he was twelve years old, they went up as usual for the festival. When the festival was ended and they started to return, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem, but his parents were unaware of this. Assuming that he was in the group of travelers, they went a day's journey. Then they started to look for him among their relatives and friends. When they did not find him, they returned to Jerusalem to search for him. After three days they found him in the temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. And all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers. (No context needed.)

Here we have an example of a young person -- just 12 -- who does something that not even his parents expect him to be able to do: Jesus baffles the Torah teachers in the synagogue in Jerusalem. Possible explanations of how he was able to do that get tangled up with later-developed Christian theology having to do with the description of Christ being both fully human and fully divine, a theological conclusion that would not have been obvious to the people to whom Jesus was speaking in the synagogue.

Questions: How might you have processed this experience at the time if you had been Mary or Joseph? And can you give examples of when your own children or grandchildren may have astonished you with their wisdom or accomplishments? How were they able to do that?

Ecclesiastes 12:1-3

Remember your creator in the days of your youth, before the days of trouble come and the years draw near when you will say, "I have no pleasure in them"; before the sun and the light and the moon and the stars are darkened and the clouds return with the rain; in the day when the guards of the house tremble, and the strong men are bent, and the women who grind cease working because they are few, and those who look through the windows see dimly. (For context, read [Ecclesiastes 12:1-14](#).)

The author of Ecclesiastes frequently looks at life through lenses that focus on troubles, on hard questions, on harsh realities. This is not the book to go to when you want to find cheery and uplifting verses to chase away the clouds. But the book does offer readers a chance to check in on the sometimes-harsh realities of life, such as aging. How do you think the overachievers who are the focus of this TWW lesson might react to the cold water that gets splashed on the faces of those who read Ecclesiastes?

Questions: So who gets it more right -- the author of Ecclesiastes or the people, young and old, who joyfully press the limits of human endurance and achievement? Or do we learn from both?

2 Timothy 4:6-8

As for me, I am already being poured out as a libation, and the time of my departure has come. I have fought the good fight; I have finished the race; I have kept the faith. From now on there is reserved for me the crown of righteousness,

which the Lord, the righteous judge, will give me on that day, and not only to me but also to all who have longed for his appearing (No context needed.)

In 2 Timothy, the writer here uses athletic language to describe being near the end of his life and waiting for "the crown of righteousness," which can be interpreted as eternal life.

Questions: How often do you think about coming toward the end of your life on Earth? At such times do you review what you've accomplished with either joy or regret -- or maybe both? Do you make lists of things you still want to do? Do you wonder or worry about what happens at the time of death? Or do you have a deep conviction that you will be in safe and loving hands when you pass from life to death? If hope is the evidence of things not seen, what gives you such hope?

For Further Discussion

1. The Institute on Aging, based in California's Bay Area, has compiled a list of top nonfiction books on aging. You can [find it here](#).

2. The Goodreads website has [this list](#) of books about child prodigies to inspire you, your children or grandchildren. Or anyone.

3. Respond to this from TWW team member Stan Purdum. Several years ago, I purchased a new book by Scott Peck, an author I've enjoyed before, who was just a few years older than me. I opened to the first page and found that he began with this autobiographical note: "I am 60 years of age. ... For me, since I am not in the best of health and feel like I have lived enough for three lifetimes, being 60 means that it is time I should start setting my affairs in order. ..." (M. Scott Peck, *The Road Less Traveled and Beyond*).

Say what? At 60? He didn't give any details about his health, so I didn't know what concerns lay behind his statement, but to my ears, 60 sounded altogether too young to be looking to sum up one's life. But that's exactly what he

did with the book; he wrote about the things he had learned from life, things he wanted to pass on to younger generations. (A few years later, I saw his obituary. He died at age 69. He had Parkinson's disease and pancreatic and liver duct cancer.)

4. Are you old? Today, the answer to that is not as clear-cut as you might expect. With advances in health care, disease-fighting and nutrition, life expectancy keeps going up. In 1840, life expectancy was only 40 years; in 1900 it was 47; in 1930 it was 60; in 1970 it was 70; in 1990 it was about 75. Although it dropped some during the pandemic, so far for 2024, it's at 79.25 years.

In view of this extending trend in lifespans, an analysis of aging undertaken in France a few years ago concluded that instead of the old threefold division of youth, middle age and old age, we can think of four ages of life. That study proposed to categorize the lifelong experiences of people as follows:

- **The First Age** - This is the period of our immaturity, the time when the pounds would melt off you like snowballs in summer. During this age we are wholly dependent on others for the basic necessities of life. The focus for our energies at this stage is on education and skill building. Like our lifespan itself, however, this age has grown longer and longer. The question individuals in this age ask one another: "What school do you go to?"
- **The Second Age** - This is a period of independence, maturity and responsibility. But the possibilities of independence are easily overwhelmed by the responsibilities. There is the never relenting need to earn more money, establish a career, confront and conquer the "real world." Raising children, paying mortgages and managing stress often define this age as taxed and tiring instead of independent and mature. But this is also the age where future plans are sketched out -- waiting for a later stage to make them a reality. The question individuals in this age ask one another: "What do you do for a living?"
- **The Third Age** - What we used to consider the beginning of "old age" has now been redesignated as the "era of personal fulfillment." Under the happiest of circumstances, here is where the deepest living of life can take

place. It is an era of creative aging. There are very few "old people" out there in the traditional sense of that phrase: Most people past retirement are healthy enough, wealthy enough and well enough to enjoy a few decades of life in front of them. Finding themselves able to contribute to society in myriad ways, the question of the Third Age is less "Have you made your peace with God?" or "Are you ready to go?" than "What are you going to do with the next 20 or 25 years of your life?" Some futurists predict that in the not-too-distant-future, a likely normal life expectancy will be 120-140 years of age. If this comes to pass, the Third Age may well become the longest and most productive period of our lives.

- **The Fourth Age** - As we are frail physical beings, there is necessarily a period that can be characterized as one of decline. Statistically, however, this phase is increasingly coming later and lasting only briefly. And even in it, we may be able to inspire and instruct younger members of our family by our example.

Responding to the News

With the Olympics coming to Paris in a few weeks, this might be a good time to acquaint yourself with the wide variety of people who will compete for the U.S. team as well as for other teams. Do they include some unusual people with intriguing stories? If you're especially engaged by some competitors, you might find ways to learn more about them and maybe even reach out to wish them well.

Prayer

Oh, Holy One, giver of life, source of love and mercy, hold us close as we work to achieve seemingly impossible goals. Guide us so that our motives for whatever we do are rooted not in a desire for mere fame but, rather, in the hope of bringing glory to you. We pray this in the name of the 12-year-old boy who dazzled the Torah teachers. Amen.

