



Winning an Olympic Medal

PierAngelo Beltrami was art director for Global Image Associates, an advertising agency founded by Jim Gavin, Michael Smith and PA (PA was Dr. Pak's favorite nickname for PierAngelo) in the Washington D.C. area. He was asked to tell the incredible story of how he won the bronze medal for cycling in the Paralympics in Seoul in October 1988. The Paralympics, a division of the Olympics for disabled athletes, which drew 4,000 competitors from 65 nations in that year. This testimony reflects how we all have the ability to adjust to many new circumstances in our lives by applying the Principle plus an element of tenacity.



PierAngelo Beltrami, Kearneysville, WV

Walking into the elevator to the CAUSA International office at the Tiffany building, on a cool April morning in 1986, I bumped into Rick Swarts a coworker. "Hi, PA," he said. "I had a dream about you."

"Oh yeah? What was it?" "I dreamed you were going to the Olympics." "What?" "Yeah, I actually saw you competing in the Olympics." I chuckled. "Thanks, Rick. You made my day." I thought it was a good joke and didn't give it a second thought.

By 1987 my family and I left NYC and moved to Annandale, Virginia to join Dr. Bo Hi Pak who was recruiting members for HQ to help the "TOP Gun" mission. One night while watching the Winter Olympics at Calgary on TV, they showed Diana Golden, a one-legged disabled skier who was skiing like a "bat out of hell" in a downhill competition. It was a stunning performance and I was very inspired because she had the same right leg amputated above the knee just like I did after a motorcycle accident in 1969. That really gave me the impetus I needed to start wondering if there was any other sport for disabled athletes to compete in. I thought about it for several months till one day I picked up the phone and finally called the US Olympic Committee.

It was already April 1988 and I wanted to find out how disabled athletes got into the Winter Olympics. The United States Olympic Committee (USOC) told me that they were preparing for the Olympic Games in Korea in September, and the disabled athletes division was currently organizing various regional competition according to each sport discipline to find qualified athletes who would make up the US Official team for the September games. I had discovered that a series of bicycle races for disabled athletes was being held in Nashville, Tennessee, at the end of May, which would be the qualifying race for the Team USA headed for the Olympics in Korea. That aroused my interest, but I felt rather unprepared to even think about competing in a bicycle race, something I had never done before. Although I had been riding a bicycle once a week around Washington D.C. Parks as a way to lose weight, keep in shape, and get some fresh air, I had never considered racing before.

Being the stubborn person that I am, I started to pray about it and felt I was being pushed to give it a try. So, I started to research what it would take to prepare for such an adventure.

Was This God's Will?

With suggestions from a friend I met on a bike path, I began cycling on the Washington D.C. Mount Vernon trail along the Potomac River, biking 50-60 miles a week. People at the bike shop told me that to really prepare for a race, I should be doing 150-200 miles per week. But how would I work up to that distance? I basically trained myself for about 40 days before heading to Nashville at the end of May.

The race in Nashville was on a Sunday morning. After the 5:00 a.m. pledge, I couldn't go back to sleep. Around 6:30 I called the race organizer to double-check the time of the race, which I had been told would commence at 9 a.m. "Everyone's already gone to the venue and the race will begin at 7:00," the man said. They had changed the time of the race and I hadn't been told because I was staying at a different hotel than most of the other racers. I was in shock and started to plead with God.

I jumped into a taxi with my bike, desperately praying that the spirit world would get the taxi there on time. When I finally got to the starting place, they had been waiting for me, amazingly, for half an hour. That was the first minor miracle! I quickly got my bike assembled, jumped on and, bang, the race started.

My total inexperience started to become apparent, and I had no idea what I was doing. At one point, my shoe slipped off the pedal, forcing me to take a brief break. I did catch up with the group only to avoid a nasty crash in front of me, leaving only eight of us in the race. Way before the end of the final loop, Kyle Underwood – the

one favored to win – dashed off on a hill all by himself on his way to take first place. Everyone else got the “memo” and we all started going like crazy, I was pushing and pulling that pedal like I’d never done before, looking down and then up to Kyle, while trying to keep steady and avoid contact with anybody else. Those few seconds sprinting felt like the longest painful minutes I’ve ever experienced in my life and, much to my surprise, I came in right after Kyle in second place. Whao! I said to myself, “What happened? How did I get here?”

A month later, an official letter from the Olympic Committee was communicating that my second-place result qualified me to be a part of the U.S. Cycling team headed to Korea. I couldn't believe what I was reading. That in itself was a major miracle.

I was amazed, overjoyed, but at the same time I was also worried, really concerned by my lack of experience and confidence. How could I ever make a good showing or bring a good result at the Olympics, having only four months to train? I started to pray to really find out if this was a part of God's Will or if it was just an ego trip?

Through prayer I came to the realization that this event would be an historical opportunity. This would be like no other Olympics that would ever occur, for this was Father's Olympics. Not only was this Olympics going to be held in Seoul, Korea, but some of Father's children were going to be competing in it as well. It would be something very, very special, and for me just to be there and represent Him in the Olympics for the disabled would be such an honor.

Even though I knew very well I had no chance at all of placing due to my age and lack of racing experience, I felt a sense of mission. I reasoned that if I was going to participate, then God would have to show me the reason why I had to do this. My responsibility was to give the best effort possible, and God would do the rest.

I Had to Take It Seriously

I started to train every day. I would work in the office during the day, and every evening I'd ride about 30-50 miles. I tried to get 200-300 miles in per week but that was not easy. When I prayed, I received that I must take my training seriously. However, it was hard because I constantly had to fight back the lack of confidence. Here I was, almost middle-aged, with no one to train me, no one to encourage me and no experience. All I had was a pink bike and (fortunately) a desire to do something good for God.

In retrospect, I realize the spirit world had been preparing the way for me. For example, I had picked up bike riding three years before. Soon after I qualified for the race, my mother sent to me a very expensive, custom-made racing bike from Italy, made by Serena, a bicycle manufacturer, serving bicyclist pros. When we moved to Virginia in 1987, we were living practically next door to a bike shop. Washington D.C. is also one of the few cities in the country that has good bike paths in and around the city.

As I prayed, I knew that fulfilling the training was going to get harder and harder, but I wanted to offer up that hardship to Father.

As time went by, it became more and more difficult to find time to ride because my workload at the office was increasing and my family needed attention too. I could ride the bicycle only early in the morning or late at night. I knew that if I continued to train on only a flat course, it would not be enough to develop endurance and power. A friend suggested that I take some time off from work to get the most out of the training time left prior to the race. I asked my central figure Dr. Pak about it and received permission. Reading and educating myself about training, I decided to go to Colorado because training at that high altitude would help me get more red blood cells into my system and help me build more stamina.

On my way to Colorado, I paid a visit to Kyle in Ohio. Although we were competitors, we went out training together for a few days and became very good friends. I drove my brown Taurus to Colorado, following part of the same route I had taken during Father's 21-city speaking tour 14 years earlier. I even stayed at the same motels where our team had stopped. It was like a kind of pilgrimage for me, going back to the days when I first joined the church.

Intense Spiritual Days

I was staying at Copper Mountain resort during that September. I rented a very inexpensive studio apartment. I was up early in the morning, climbing the roads for 5 to 10 miles. In the afternoons I would go on long rides of about 30-40 miles. This was often challenging because of the changing weather. I would be training alone most of the time, so I just had to push myself to go up those hills -- rain or shine. It was still summertime, but at 13,000 feet over the Vail Pass, it could get pretty cold. At times I felt ready to quit, but then I would think, "Hey, if I quit now I can never hope to win anything!" I endured because I realized I was getting better every day.

My bike gear was not appropriate for climbing, so going uphill I was very slow. With every push of the pedal, I would think of something to indemnify: the home church that I didn't finish; the goal of 1-1-1 witnessing that I didn't realize; not being a good enough husband; not being a good enough father – this way, my riding was a time to pray, repent and talk to Heavenly Father. Many times I felt the deep heart that God has for us. Being out there by myself was a lonely but intensely spiritual experience. I realized if I could get a medal, any medal, I could offer it to True Parents representing the American members. It would be as if the American members were giving a medal to our True Parents in recognition of the tremendous sacrifice and suffering they had to endure for the sake of this country. I felt that, actually, Father should receive many medals --

even from the United States government, which had mistreated Him so terribly. When I realized this, I said to myself, "That's it! That's why I should strive to win a medal. If this can bring any comfort to True Father, I will do it!" This determination propelled me forward to train even harder.

Later on in Seoul, other athletes I became friends with would say things like, "I want to win this for my wife," or "I want to win this for my country." But, holding back tears I would think, "I'm doing this for God. I'm actually here trying to win a medal for God." That motivation was the highest I could have. It gave me great encouragement and power to overcome the loneliness, hard training and lack of confidence. I went forward feeling I had to do my absolute 100% best every day. Then God would have a condition to work. It would be completely up to God and His Will. My prayer condition was not so that I could win a gold medal but so that God could use the race for His Will, whatever that might be.

Race with a Purpose?

An amazing thing happened while in training. One day a lawyer from the church called from Washington D.C. He told me the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) was willing to help me expedite getting my U.S. citizenship if I chose to. He said, "Wouldn't you rather represent the team as a US citizen rather than an alien with a green card?" He told me that if I came to Washington D.C. the next day, the INS could arrange an interview, I could be sworn in and become a U.S. citizen, all in one day. So, I took him up on his offer. I flew in, and in one day I became an American citizen! Then I flew right back. My prayer strongly wanting to represent the United States was really being heard.

During the last part of my 40-day training I worked with two daring bicyclists from Denver whom I met out on the road, and who helped me push beyond what I thought possible and who later became my good friends. One of them Jonny Gibbons, an avid cyclist who

challenged me every time to climb Vail Pass in a shorter time than I previously had. One day we went up a mountain road that was closed to traffic. It was immersed in beautiful green pastures with some pine trees along the steep valley below. We must have climbed for about 45 minutes until a barrier blocked the way further up. Descending at high speed, Jonny would tease me yelling "catch-me, catch-me," and like a fool, I would oblige and pedal downhill as fast as I could, reaching top speed of 56 mph. Flying down that road was sensational and, with the fresh air in my face, the exhilarating feeling of freedom was awesome. The road was fully available for us crazy cyclists! Next, barreling down the mountain, we turned one of several fast corners and we realized, a bit too late, we were not going to have enough time to stop and avoid the gutter that traversed the road from one side to the other. No time to pray or think. The only solution was to intuitively "jump" the gutter and hope to clear the metal grid. Jonny knew the technique of lifting the bike in midair but I had never experienced such a situation before. I was able to pull the bike up but my rear wheel did not follow and a loud bang ensued. Somehow I managed to land both wheels on the asphalt, fearing I had blown the rear tire but I was still standing. The next few seconds I applied both brakes hard as the edge of the road was fast approaching...to this day I do not know how I managed to steer away from flying for real into the valley below. The adrenaline is still pumping when I recall those crazy times. At the end of the ride we were both laughing as nerve tremors were creeping into our tired bodies.

I drove back home just in time to receive the plane ticket, the official USOC uniform, more branded clothes, and lots of pins from the Olympic Committee. We were told the Paralympics Games were to be held in the very same venues, only two weeks after the Olympics Games concluded in Seoul.

When we got to Korea, we realized how incredibly loving and serving the Korean people were. Every athlete I talked to felt

grateful and totally flabbergasted by the warm welcome they received in Seoul. One guy from Czechoslovakia even told me he wanted to defect from his country and live in Korea because he felt the Korean people were so amazing!

The cycling competitors in my class were mostly in their twenties and in excellent shape. Unlike us they were sponsored directly by their country. Strangely I didn't feel any antagonism toward them. I just felt all of us from many different parts of the world were there for a high purpose – we were all called to participate in this incredible event at the Olympics and Paralympics Games for the glory of God.

Finally, when our Paralympic Games opened, it was like watching the Opening Ceremony of the Olympic Games all over again, with the only difference being I was seeing the opening ceremonies from inside the stadium, marching in and waving the American flag to a jam-packed stadium of 80,000 applauding Koreans. Many of the athletes were struggling to hide their tears; other wept openly as they had sacrificed a lot to be there.

The President of Korea gave a nice speech. He talked about brotherhood among people, about peace and harmony, and about breaking down the barriers of prejudice and misunderstanding. It was a very moving moment.

The Final Sprint

No one else had a pink bike, and it may have seemed strange for a man to ride a pink bike. But Father likes the color pink because, in Korea, pink is the color of the Messiah. So I was riding a messianic-colored bicycle, given to me by my physical parents but with the color of the True Parents. Hmm... Guess what number I

was given for the race? My competition number was No. 40. When I saw that, I knew God was up to something.

On the day of the race, my wife Mary made a prayer condition. She prayed from midnight to 2:00 am. My spiritual children also made strong prayer conditions. They prayed for safety and for God's will to be done.

The race course was 50 kilometers, about 35 miles. It was a nice but, at times, bumpy, flat course developed around the perimeter of the Olympic Park. There were 48 cyclists divided into three different classifications depending upon the degree of disability. There were 15 in my classification. The US Team included Kyle, a brother named John Rinehart, and myself. During the race, I had to get my clues from Kyle since he had had more experience racing with international competitors before. I just played my part covering stronger cyclists, especially those from France. We shared equally the burden of neutralizing the opposition. Whenever Kyle yelled over to me, "Go and catch that guy before he goes too far!" I would go do it. However, we were playing defense and that's not always a winning strategy.

At one point, from the back of the pack a French cyclist named Tristan sprinted past all of us with a Korean cyclist on his tail. They just took off so fast none of us could even dream of catching them. At that moment, I felt rather discouraged. "There goes the gold and silver medal" I thought. At that moment I knew that unless God worked a miracle, nothing was going to happen.

The pace kept going up, faster by the lap and, in the last curve before the long stretch, one of the riders from Austria pulled the handlebar right off his bike, causing a crash in front of us, and nearly taking everyone else down. As we approached the final stretch everyone started sprinting like crazy. With about 100 yards to go, the other favored Frenchman was leading, with Kyle and myself on his tail. "Heavenly Father, this is it," I prayed.

Those long yards from the finish line seemed like an eternity. I was pushing and pulling that pedal as fast as I could, hoping my bike would take the abuse. The uneven torsional action of pulling and pushing was causing the bike to vibrate but I kept my head down, pedaling hard while streams of sweat were covering my face, hands and leg. As I passed the checkered line, I raise my head to discover there was no one next to me. I had just pushed past my best friend Kyle and the French guy, and won the bronze! I raised my hand in joy and shouted, "Aboji, MANSE!!" The Korean crowd looked bewildered with a big question mark on their faces.

Overwhelmed By Love

It is hard to describe the incredible surprise and the overwhelming feeling of God's love whose power had made this happen. I knew it was a miracle. I felt that winning the bronze was the very best I could have done...and I just started to cry. The coach and the rest of the team congratulated me. They said, "The first two riders aren't part of our original classification because they have less of a handicap than you do. So, as far as we're concerned, this is as good as gold!" This comforted me and I prayed, "God, this is Your victory. You wanted me to do it and I did it." I felt that God was smiling



The lesson I learned through this whole experience is that there is immense power in an indemnity condition. If we do our part 100 percent, God never lets us down. When we have an intuition to do something for God, check it in humble prayer, and if it's what God wants you to do, then do it. Although we may never fully understand the significance of it right away, later on it can be revealed. I was deeply grateful to be used by God in this way.

I thank everyone who supported me with their prayers, especially Mary and my spiritual children. Only through the power of prayer is victory possible. I was the oldest competitor there, and my leg muscles were not half as impressive as the muscles of my competitors. It seems as if God always waits until the very last moment. In that last sprint when I felt desperate, I gave it my all and He pulled it off! I really feel God did it, not me.



At a leader's conference in East Garden on November 16, 1988, during a break, Dr. Pak pull me aside and then brought me in front of True Father. I had the great privilege of telling Father directly part of the story and presented the Bronze medal to him. The smile on his face made me very happy. It made the whole experience worth every mile.

