

Weakness and the Olympic Spirit

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There is no doubt in my mind that Sally Robbins' quitting on Sunday was a repeat display of complete mental weakness, not 'physical exhaustion' as the media is reporting. [Former Australian Olympic rowing medallist, Rachel Taylor.]

If there is no physiological reason why Sally Robbins gave up in the women's eight rowing final then I am outraged ... Our international reputation [is] that we never give up. [Australian Olympian, Jane Flemming.]

It has captured the attention of the nation. Not the hours and weeks and months spent in preparing to row at the Olympics, but the fact that one member of the women's eight rowing squad collapsed two thirds of the way through the event.

It was the final of the 2000m event. The eight member Australian team had started out well, with a gold medal in sight. But with 650 metres to the finish line, team-member Sally Robbins collapsed, later saying she was paralysed with anxiety and fatigue, and could not continue. The boat was overtaken by the other teams, and Australia finished last.

It has not been the fact that the team did not win gold, nor even their last place that has dominated the news, but rather the vitriolic reaction from some other team members. There were threats to throw Robbins out of the boat, and emotional scenes in front of cameras immediately after the race. Hours later, team mates were still giving Sally the silent treatment and avoiding eye contact. "I haven't really experienced anything like that before," she said.

But this treatment did not just come from team mates. "From a distance," said former Olympic champion Cathy Freeman, "to give up is almost very un-Australian." Under the front-page headline, "JUST OARFUL," Sydney's *Daily Telegraph* opined that "Robbins has committed the greatest crime there is in honest sport ... She quit." *The Australian* dubbed her "lay-down Sally". Out of over 25,000 respondents to an *SMH* poll (as at midnight 24 August), 20% thought she has been treated "a little harshly, perhaps, but not unfairly," while for 23%, "she deserves everything she got." The harshest criticism came from former team-mate Rachael Taylor, in a scathing letter to *The Australian*, and as quoted above. Harshest, that is, until two-time Olympian Jane Flemming weighed in the next day, also as quoted above.

From a distance, it is hard to know all the issues involved. The searing core of Taylor's and Flemming's attacks pivot on the fact that this was the second time Sally had been weak in international racing (and so there have also been questions about coaching and selection). Given this background, Rachel Taylor points to the trust that Sally's crewmates had put in her after her previous collapse. "What the public witnessed after Sunday's race was the crew's devastating realisation that this trust had been misplaced in what should have been one of the greatest moments of their lives." There are always two parties in any dispute, and reconciliation requires both to admit where they were wrong.

But what is most interesting is the way the matter has been made to turn on what constitutes 'weakness.' Taylor blames 'mental weakness', but others point to the physical limits that the body can reach at this level of stress. For Megan Jones, sports scientist with the Victorian Institute of Sport, it wasn't about Robbins's mind. Rather, she had crossed her physical threshold—the point where the body can no longer clear muscular lactic acid. Once that threshold is passed, "she couldn't continue, no matter how hard she tried," according to Jones. Triple Olympic rowing gold medallist James Tomkins said this level of racing was daunting, and it was not rare for a crew member to collapse in exhaustion. A Canadian crew member became spent in one of their races. "It's not an overly rare occurrence," Tomkins said. Other commentators suggest that Robbin's collapse is not surprising, given the team's extreme output during the first half of the race.

It seems that if the failure was a physical one, then as Flemming says, there is no problem; but if the failure was mental—well then, as Flemming also seems to say, Sally deserves everything she gets. Indeed since Sally failed twice, the implication is that she must be *habitually* weak—apparently an even worse outrage than a one-off failure.

This way of seeing things typifies the idolisation of the will that is central to modern Western thought. In theology, this attitude is called Pelagianism, named after a fourth-century British monk who was of the view that whatever we *should* do, we therefore *can* do; so we should therefore **just do it**. It is an entirely cruel and callous way of thinking, which avoids something central in the good news of Jesus Christ: that all of us are weak, powerless and helpless, whether physically, or mentally, or morally. This sad but honest assessment of our true condition is liberating in itself. The unexpected good news that follows tells of how God gracefully makes weaklings like us safe with him anyway. “When we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly.” [Romans 5:6]

But the very name ‘Olympian’ is meant to carry with it the sense of ultimate victory over mental weakness. Even Olympians cannot control whether their bodies fail; but for us to adore them, they must ‘do their best’, meaning they must have *no moments of weakness in their mind, or will*. They must always display total mastery, whether we call it ‘mind over matter’, or ‘giving it all they’ve got’, or ‘going for broke’ ... or nowadays, ‘being Australian’.

So when Sally Robbins appeared at the news conference of 24 August and attributed her failure to ‘anxiety’, at best we may pity her, but we may no longer respect her. Allied to this utter rejection of weakness, we saw at this same news conference the way that a society who forgets that all are weak and need Christ’s rescue, also forgets what it is to ‘repent’ and forgive. At no point in the news conference was Sally able to say ‘sorry’ to her team mates. At no point were they able to say ‘it’s OK; we forgive you’—for repentance and forgiveness are, after all, weak. And while they were at it, to round off the Pelagianism of this now quintessential Australian moment, Kyeema Doyle declared that from now on, *she* would go about getting what *she* deserved.

Perhaps one of the most enormous absurdities in this whole affair has been that unlike Kyeema, most of the Australians who pilloried Robbins could not have lasted thirty seconds in that boat. Sally rowed brilliantly for most of the race, serving with the team for 1400 metres—not that we are ever likely to see *that* footage again. For she is an idol that totters in our Olympic pantheon, falling down and breaking her already weakened head. A quitter, a loser, and un-Australian—because of course none of *us* ever quit, do we.

For many Pelagian Australians, she is unforgivable, and must be punished. She will get everything she deserves. Generations of heartless journalists will make Sally endure the ‘lay-down Sally’ footage in every ‘Olympic Memories’ from her twenty-third year until the day she dies. Her tiny moment of weakness will symbolise all the endless weaknesses that we hate about ourselves but won’t admit to, and like a parody of Israel’s scapegoat, she will forever bear our own hatred of ourselves, a kind of living pariah amongst us. She may never row in a team again. She probably won’t be commentating the 2008 Olympics.

There is an innocent joy in watching God’s magnificence displayed through Olympians who can perform such stunning feats. But people who know the gospel of Jesus repudiate the dark side of the ‘Olympic spirit’—the attempt to so exalt human power over weakness that no room is left for grace, or forgiveness, or reconciliation, or care, or support.

Sally, if ever you read this, know that God loves you, and that plenty of Australians still respect you. You are a magnificent oarswoman at the height of your powers, and we are sad that the race didn’t work out for you. We also hope you will do your part to reconcile with your team mates. We commend to you these strange words, so at odds with the dark side of the ‘Olympic spirit’:

[God] said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.’ Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ’s power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ’s sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong. [St Paul, 2 Corinthians 12:9-10]

We pray that all Olympians might come to know the One who saves them from their weakness, and offers to give them his strength.

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Sources:

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