

## **'SECOND PLACE IS THE FIRST LOSER'**

**By: Sergio Fortes**

Twenty-two women, physically gifted and well-prepared, competed in the final, championship match of women's soccer (also commonly known as "football") during the recent the Olympic Games in Beijing, China. Both teams battled valiantly to win their dream, the coveted gold medal. But no matter how well they both played, there was only one gold medal to be awarded. Only one team could win; the other team had to lose.

Regulation time for the match ended without a goal being scored. During the overtime period, the sides took turns taking shots on the goal, again with the intention that one team would outscore the other to be declared the winner. The TV coverage showed one of the women players showing despair after missing one of the overtime shots, declaring, *"My God, what's happening?"*

Finally, a winning team was determined. Exhausted, the losers either sat or laid down on the playing field weeping. Their frustration is widespread and evident. At the homes of some players, relatives of the defeated competitors burst into tears, absolutely disappointed. At the podium during the awards ceremony, the entire team of beautiful young women, with eyes red and swollen, did not attempt to hide feelings of defeat. With no emotion, smiles or joy, they accepted the second place silver medal as it had little value.

The business and professional world is not very different from this scene at the Olympics. The corporate environment is often divided into winners and losers. Those who come in second are dismissed, not given any reason to celebrate. The second-place finisher feels like a vanquished failure. As one popular Brazilian Formula 1 racing champion once stated, *"Second place is the first loser."*

The Olympic Games continues to reward second and the third-place athletes, but does that make sense if the only medal that really matters is the gold one? One third-place finisher discarded his bronze medal at the podium, arguing he had invested four years to win the gold and anything less was unacceptable.

Competitors at such events know they cannot make a single mistake. After all, mistakes are the reason for losing a chance at the gold medal. However, we may place too high a premium on victory and underestimate the value of failure. When receiving the Nobel Prize for his discovery of quantum theory, Max Planck quoted German author and philosopher Johann Wolfgang von Goethe: *"While they remain fighting for something, men will always be committing mistakes."* In other words, to move forward effectively, not only will we make mistakes, but we also must learn from them.

And yet, to admit defeat – and its twin brother, failure – frightens us. Society welcomes the victorious, pays tribute to the winner, rewards first place. The loser lies abandoned on the lawn, slumped at the desk, left to suffer as a conquered "vice-champion." So we hide our mistakes, mask our failures. Bankruptcy, an insolvent company, a business partner's betrayal – all fall into the "second place" category. Totally unacceptable.

But Albert Einstein, the acclaimed genius and celebrated physicist, said: "A person who never made a mistake has never tried anything new." In the relentless struggle for success, determined to finish first, we can forget important values of placing second. Jesus warned against this when He said: *"For what profit is it to a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul?"* (Matthew 16.26).

Knowing how to select priorities and distinguish the essential from the superfluous is fundamental. The apostle Paul understood that. He declared: *"Yet indeed I also count all things loss for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as rubbish, that I may gain Christ"* (Philippians 3.8).

It may not always be possible to win, but it will always be possible to decide what we do not want to lose.

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Reflection/Discussion Questions

1. If you had an opportunity to watch any of the events in the Summer Olympics earlier this year, did you focus all of your attention on the winners – or did you notice the reactions of those that finished in second place, or third?

2. What is your reaction to Mr. Fortes's contention that we do people a disservice when we discredit the efforts of those who strived hard, yet failed to win first place?

3. In the statements cited by Goethe and Einstein, they seem to hold the view that making mistakes and experiencing failure are essential ingredients for achieving success. Do you agree?

4. If we acknowledge the reality that in sports, in business and in virtually every other area of life, many people will have to accept finishing second – or third – does that diminish the incentive for striving to become the best? Explain your answer.

*NOTE: If you have a Bible and would like to consider some other passages that concern this topic, turn to the following:*

Matthew 19:28-30, 1 Corinthians 9:24-27, Philippians 3:12-14; 2 Timothy 2:3-6