

DOWN HOME: Pass on the silver; bring on the bronze

August 14, 2008

If I ever compete in the Olympics ... I'll probably write a book and sell the movie rights about the story of the oldest and worst athlete ever to make a first-time appearance in the world's most venerated sports event.

But back to my main point: If I ever compete in the Olympics, I'd rather win a bronze medal than a silver.

Bronze medalists just seem happier.

Consider the 2008 U.S. women's and men's Olympic gymnastics teams.

One night (actually, it was the next morning where they were, but that's a whole 'nother story), the men won the bronze. They were ecstatic. They whooped and hollered and high-fived. I went to bed smiling, just thinking about how thrilled they were.

Twenty-four hours later, the women won the silver. Oh, they smiled bravely for the cameras, but they were bitterly disappointed they couldn't catch the Chinese girls and garnish the gold.

I know, I know—extenuating circumstances.

Before they got to Beijing, the men's team had been decimated by injuries. Nobody believed this ragtag troupe of flyers and leapers could pull off any kind of run at a medal. They proved the whole world wrong. Around their necks, bronze sparkled brightly.

But the women expected more. After two Chinese girls bobbled on the balance beam, the Americans could taste gold. Then came a great fall off

that four-inch plank, plus a fall and out-of-bounds landings on the floor exercises. The Yanks grimaced to keep from crying as the thunder of the Chinese crowd rang in their ears.

All this proves my point. In most cases—with the possible exception of everyone in the pool with Michael Phelps—athletes who receive silver expect to win gold. In their minds, they replay tapes of infinitesimal mistakes that cost them time or points, as well as golden glory. And they focus on what they lost, not what they won. Bronze medalists, on the other hand, usually seem tickled just to be up there with the big guns. I'm guessing they check out of the Olympic Village with the sweetest memories.

Don't get me wrong. I'm a high-expectation person. In fact, the people who know me best—like my family and closest friends—would tell you that's a major character flaw. That's because the drive to achieve and succeed often undermines appreciation of achievement and success.

While gold-medal-winners glow in the limelight, they must wonder if they can keep it up. And silver-winners winnow the what-ifs. But bronzers seem to enjoy the moment.

This reminds me of recognizing God's grace. When that realization of divine blessing arrives, you don't have to worry about earning it or fret over who has it.

You exult in a deep measure of joy.