

"Pressing On!"  
Philippians 3:12-14  
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Yesterday at 7:02 p.m., I was where I have been every year for this event since 1969- in front of a television set watching the Kentucky Derby. You see, for me “the Run for the Roses” takes on a significance that’s every bit as great as any Super Bowl game. Two hours before the START of the race, I’m ALREADY glued to all the pre-race activities. I’m listening to the TV announcers as they delve into the histories of each of those horses and provide background information on their owners and trainers; I’m evaluating what the professional handicappers say as they rate which ones they think have the best odds of winning; and I download and study the past performances of each of their races so as to make as informed a pick as I can. The reality is that I LOVE THOROUGHBRED HORSERACING, and though the “Sport of Kings” may no longer have the same cache or popularity it once did, my OWN love for the sport has never diminished. I can’t recall ever having missed a Derby, Preakness, or Belmont in half a century and the one MOST responsible for that was not even a PERSON but a HORSE- the IMMORTAL SECRETARIAT, my ALL-TIME FAVORITE SPORTS HERO and arguably THE GREATEST THOROUGHBRED IN HORSE RACING HISTORY.

On June 9th, 1973, it was Secretariat who provided me with the most memorable sporting moment of my life- and I didn't even get to watch it on TV but had to catch it on my car radio! On that date, Secretariat won the Belmont Stakes in record fashion to become the first Triple Crown winner since Citation some twenty-five years earlier. In fact, winning the Kentucky Derby, the Preakness, and the Belmont Stakes over a seven-week period is SO challenging, only thirteen horses have ever accomplished that feat in the past hundred and fifty years with the last one to do it being American Pharaoh just two years ago. However, what sets Secretariat apart wasn't merely that he swept all three races but it was HOW he did it that made him an American icon, a legend for the ages.

On that first Saturday in May, 1973, Secretariat entered the Kentucky Derby as the 3-to-2 favorite but with a disappointing third place finish in the Wood Memorial several weeks earlier, there were some lingering doubts about him. After breaking near the back of the pack, Secretariat began picking up horses on the first turn, came up on Sham at the top of the lane, and drew off to a 2-1/2-length victory, while running the first and only sub-two-minute Derby in history. It was simply the greatest Kentucky Derby performance of all time. His quarter-mile splits were unprecedented, having run each quarter faster than the PRECEDING one. Not even the most veteran race track observer could recall a horse who had ever done this in a mile-and-a-quarter race.

In the Preakness--the second leg of the Triple Crown--jockey Ron Turcotte sensed a slow early pace, let out a notch, and Secretariat cruised to the front as the six-horse field entered the backstretch. Secretariat dominated the rest of the race, winning by 2-1/2 lengths over Sham- once MORE in record time.

On June 9th, only five horses showed up for the Belmont Stakes, including Secretariat's primary rival Sham. What everyone witnessed that day is considered the greatest performance in horse racing history- what one sports writer termed the equivalent of Joe Namath passing for ten touchdowns in a single football game, Jack Nicklaus shooting 55 in a U.S. Open, or Michael Jordan scoring 75 points in an NBA Final. That afternoon, I was working for my brother-in-law at a construction site in central New Jersey who as I found out later had taken the day off from his drywall sanding business to attend the race with my sister. When the race was about to begin, I dropped my equipment, rushed out to the car, and turned on the radio- what I heard made the hair on my head stand on end. As he had in the first two races, Secretariat started near the rear before picking up the pace and passing his competitors on the backstretch. As he entered the far turn, I want you to now hear the famous call of Chic Anderson, the track announcer, as he narrated the conclusion of that race:

*They're moving on the turn now...For the turn it's Secretariat. He looks like he's opening. The lead is increasing. Make it three, three and a half. He's moving into the turn. Secretariat holding on to a large lead. Sham is second, and then it's a long way back to My Gallant and Twice a Prince. They're on the turn and Secretariat is BLAZING along....the first three quarters of a mile in one oh nine and four-fifths. Secretariat is WIDENING now...He is moving like a TREMENDOUS machine...Secretariat by TWELVE...Secretariat by FOURTEEN lengths on the turn. Sham is dropping back. It looks like they'll catch HIM today as My Gallant and Twice a Prince are both coming up to him now. But Secretariat is all ALONE. He's out there almost a sixteenth of a mile away from the rest of the horses. Secretariat is in a position that seems impossible to catch. He's into the stretch. Secretariat leads this field by eighteen lengths and now Twice a Prince has taken second and My Gallant has moved back to third. They're in the stretch. Secretariat has opened a TWENTY-TWO LENGTH lead. He is going to be the TRIPLE CROWN WINNER. Here comes Secretariat to the wire. An UNBELIEVABLE, and AMAZING performance. He hits the finish...TWENTY-FIVE lengths in front. It's going to be Twice a Prince second, My Gallant third, Private Smiles fourth, and Sham, who had it today, dropped back to fifth. An AMAZING, UNBELIEVABLE performance by this miracle horse, and LOOK AT MRS. TWEEDY.....*

In fact, Secretariat won the Belmont, NOT BY 25 LENGTHS as the announcer had said but by 31 LENGTHS, an ALL-TIME RECORD, clipping almost three seconds off the track record for a mile and a half. My brother-in-law told me he was so far ahead of the others that after he crossed the finish line, there was nothing but complete silence for about fifteen seconds until the REST of the pack finally crossed the line.

Secretariat made the covers of TIME, SPORTS ILLUSTRATED and NEWSWEEK all in the same week. Humorist Art Buchwald wrote a famous column touting him for President as he was considerably more popular than the then President, Richard Nixon. Secretariat transcended his own sport to become a cultural phenomenon, a sort of undeclared national holiday from the headlines of Watergate and Vietnam. Fifteen years later, in 1988, one of my greatest dreams was fulfilled when I received a personal tour of Claiborne Farms just outside of Lexington, Kentucky and got to spend an afternoon with him and other horse racing royalty. His personal groom, Bobby Anderson, took me over to his paddock and gave a loud whistle. "Red!" he called (they

always called him Big Red and never Secretariat). "Red, come over here!" The most beautiful and famous racehorse to ever grace a race track dutifully trotted over to us, a routine he had performed hundreds of times in the past for his fans. I petted that beautiful chestnut-colored chest of his and had pictures of myself taken with him. It was one of the greatest days of my life.

The metaphor of "the race" is repeatedly employed throughout the New Testament. The author of Hebrews writes: "Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us..." To his young disciple Timothy, the Apostle Paul admitted: "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that Day..." Likewise, in his letter to the church at Philippi, Paul states:

*Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. Brethren, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but one thing I do, forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.*

The point Paul is trying to make is that life is a great foot race; it is a grueling marathon that needs to be run with every bit of our patience, skill, and intelligence. As the Olympic athletes trained for their race, so must WE as the people of God train for OURS; as they exercised the body, so must WE exercise the soul. In other words, we need a renewed intensity and commitment and love if we're ever going to complete the race set before us. We have to decide every day that we will "press on," that despite all the temptations and trials and disappointments we face, we won't look back for each of us has a goal before us to reach!

Paul then says, "forgetting what lies behind." Nothing keeps us from the goal of becoming mature Christians than the inability to put behind us the failures and disappointments of our past. We can remember events without allowing the guilt and regret that often comes with such memories to tear us up and destroy us. If we have done something wrong, we need to repent of it, ask God to forgive us, and then be thankful for Christ's pardon without allowing it to return and steal from us God's peace. We must learn to let go of everything that could hinder us and that means moving past old grudges and ancient hurts and past failures, and with God's help, we CAN.

And finally Paul says, "straining forward to what lies ahead." We must never be content with the work God has already done in our lives for spiritual maturity is a life-long process; there is so much more for God to do in us. When Paul says earlier in Philippians, "He who has begun a good work in you will complete it until the day of Jesus Christ," what he means is that until that day when Christ returns to put away all sin and death and to finally establish his kingdom, we will CONTINUE to be a work in progress. As he himself could say, "I count not myself yet to have laid hold." Therefore, we must press on and stretch forward, and with Christ's help, we CAN and we WILL!

On Labor Day, 1989, Secretariat was diagnosed as having a mild case of laminitis--an

inflammation of the inner tissues of the hooves--but he soon appeared to be recovering. Suddenly, on the morning of Oct. 3, he began experiencing extreme pain. The next morning, Seth Hancock, the head of Clairborne Farms, along with the house veterinarian decided to put Secretariat to sleep. At 11:45, groom Bobby Anderson loaded Secretariat into a van outside his stall, and the doctor gave him a lethal injection. He died in less than a minute. His body was trucked immediately to Lexington where Dr. Thomas Swerczek, a professor of veterinary science at the University of Kentucky, performed the autopsy. All the horse's vital organs were normal in size except for the HEART. "We were all shocked," Swerczek said. "I've seen and done thousands of autopsies on horses, and nothing I'd ever seen compared to it. The heart of the average horse weighs about nine pounds. This was almost twice the average size, and a third larger than any equine heart I'd ever seen. And it wasn't pathologically enlarged. All the chambers and the valves were normal. It was just larger. It think it told us why he was able to do what he did." Secretariat was finally laid to rest in an oak coffin not far from the grave of his father, the great Bold Ruler.

Secretariat was a champion above all because he had the HEART of a champion. They say that they'll never again see the likes of him, that he was not just a horse that comes along once in a lifetime but once in a MILLENNIUM. As Seth Hancock put it, "You want to know who Secretariat is in human terms? Just imagine the greatest athlete in the world. The greatest. Now make him six feet three, the perfect height. Make him intelligent and real kind. And on top of that, make him the best-looking guy ever to come down the pike. He was all of those things as a horse. He's a legend."

Four Christmases ago, Rod Carew--the former seven-time American League batting champion, Most Valuable Player, and member of the Baseball Hall-of-Fame--received the greatest gift OF ALL- the gift of NEW LIFE that comes with a heart and kidney transplant. Two years before, he had suffered a massive heart attack while playing golf and doctors implanted a mechanical heart device in his chest as a temporary measure. Fourteen months later, he was put on the heart transplant list. Most of the time, people who receive such transplants are never told who the donor was but Carew's wife, Rhonda, did some investigation and eventually uncovered the person's identity- a fact later confirmed by the heart association. It had come from a former National Football League player who had played three seasons for the New York Jets and the Baltimore Ravens. His name was Konrad Reuland and he was only 29. The month before, Reuland was running on a treadmill and working out in hopes of getting a tryout with another NFL team when he developed a terrible headache. He wound up collapsing from a brain aneurysm and never regained consciousness. The irony is that Reuland had gone to grade school with Carew's children years earlier.

Afterwards, the Carews and the Reulands got together. The Reulands each took a stethoscope and listened to Konrad's heart in Carew's chest. "Does it sound the same?" Rhonda Carew asked Mary Reuland, Konrad's mom. She nodded and smiled, "I've got it memorized." Said the baseball great, "I will take care of it, this heart, because I've been given a second chance." Since then, the two families have been becoming fast friends. Said Mary, "I told Rod and Rhonda when they came here, and I strongly believe this, that they are now a part of our family. My son's heart is beating in your chest. You are a part of our family, and you will be

invited to family functions whether you want to come or not.”

My friends, the fact is that as Children of God and brothers and sisters of Jesus Christ, we TOO have received a new heart and as a result, we TOO have become part of a whole new family. God has performed a spiritual transplant on US and therefore, we ALSO have been offered a new life, the opportunity for a new beginning, the chance to start all over again with a fresh clean start that is every bit as real and life-saving as the heart Rod Carew received four years ago. Centuries before Jesus was born, the prophet Jeremiah had announced that the day would come when God would establish a “new covenant” with his people, Israel. He would recreate them by outfitting them with NEW inner natures; he would make them BRAND NEW by removing their old hearts of stone and replacing them with hearts of flesh. He would then inscribe his law on the insides of this new heart so that everyone would not only KNOW God’s will but each would have the desire to SERVE the Lord ABOVE EVERYTHING ELSE.

With our Lord’s entrance into the world, Jeremiah’s promise had finally been fulfilled; with Jesus Christ, the law of God has now been inscribed upon OUR hearts. Thus, we serve God, not because of some external law, but out of humility and gratefulness for the love God has shown us. With Jesus Christ--the Lamb of God—our iniquities are forgiven and our sins are remembered no more. Through his Spirit, our heart becomes his home whereby he comforts us, corrects us, and guides us as to where he would have us go. Thus, like the Apostle Paul, we TOO can run the race, we TOO can finish the course because he who empowers and directs US, he who promises to help US back up on our feet when we stumble and carry US when we can go no further, is no less a champion HIMSELF. Like Secretariat, Christ TOO has a heart that is uncommonly large--one SUBSTANTIALLY bigger than either yours or mine--and it is only as we keep our eyes fixed on him that we TOO will find our OWN lives changed. Only as WE keep our purpose fixed and OUR resolve sure will OUR faith then become bolder, our confidence stronger, and our hope fully charged. Only THEN can we be assured that we TOO will finish the race and receive that crown which God has reserved for all those who persevere to the end. Amen and amen.