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IGNITING MINISTRY



Bryan Clay:

A Redeemed Champion

I may be one of the most unlikely Olympic decathletes in the history of the games.

I'm shorter and lighter than most decathletes. In fact, I'm the smallest decathlete to ever win an Olympic gold medal. There are no sports stars in my family. No one in my family is active in sports at all.

I come from a broken home. When I was young, my parents' marriage disintegrated in a haze of marijuana smoke and violence, ripping me up emotionally. As I grew angrier, I beat up other kids and got kicked out of schools in Hawaii. I started partying in seventh grade, smoking grass and going to class drunk.

I was far more likely to end up in jail, hooked on drugs or involved in a teenage pregnancy than become an Olympic champion with my picture on Wheaties boxes.

But my praying mother—transformed by God's love—foresaw my destiny and asked Jesus to change her rebellious son into a world-class athlete whose story of redemption would inspire others.

By putting God first, I won the silver medal in Athens in 2004. As billions watched on television in 2008, I won the gold medal in the decathlon at the Beijing Olympic Games. Now, London 2012 puts me in reach of setting Olympic history by becoming the only decathlete to win three Olympic medals.

As I train for this summer's Olympics, I still don't understand why God singled me out and why He made me a promise that I refused to believe for many years—a promise to use me for good, even when I saw no good in my life.

I was born on Jan. 3, 1980, in Austin, Texas, to Gregory and Michele Clay. My father is an

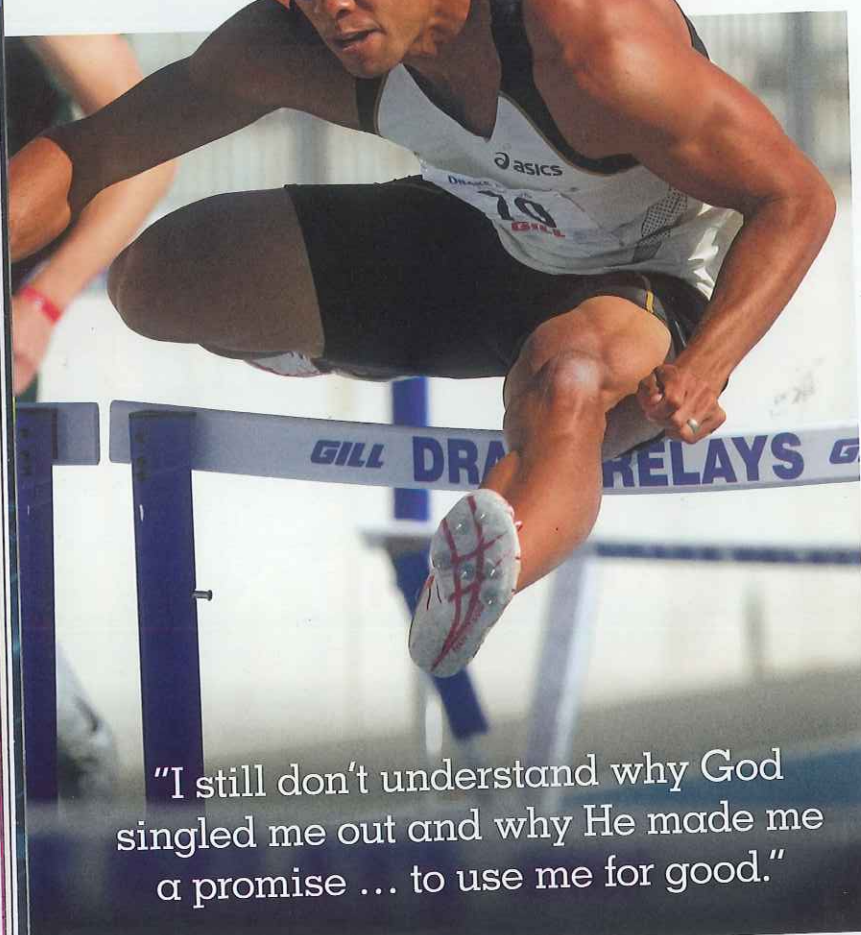
African-American, and my mother is of Japanese heritage. My dad enlisted in the military shortly after my birth. In 1983, he was transferred to an army base at the Presidio in San Francisco. Life was good in those early years.

After my dad got out of the military, we moved to Kaneohe, Hawaii, where my mom had grown up. At home, my parents often fought. They began smoking marijuana, which brought even more unhappiness. At the same time, I began getting in trouble at school, fighting other kids. The more my parents fought, the more anger built and the more trouble I got into.

It was at this time that I realized I had some athletic talent. In 1988, I was watching the summer Olympics with my parents, and I saw Carl Lewis run the 100-meter dash. I told them, "I want to do that when I get older."

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"I still don't understand why God singled me out and why He made me a promise ... to use me for good."

Olympic champion **Bryan Clay** tells his story of going from a pre-suicidal, self-cutting student to a man transformed by a commitment to Christ in his book *Redemption: A Rebellious Spirit, a Praying Mother, and the Unlikely Path to Olympic Gold* (Thomas Nelson), which released in May. Clay will attempt to become the first decathlete to win three medals when he competes this summer at the London 2012 Olympic Games, which commence July 27.

ONLINE: BryanClay.com

One day, my mom asked me if I would still love her if she wasn't there. The next thing I knew, she left for more than two months. I later learned she went to see an old boyfriend in Texas. He started taking her to church, and she became a born-again Christian. Afterward, she came home and started taking us to church.

But things at home didn't get better. My parents got divorced when I was in fifth grade. Not long afterward, I began cutting myself with razors and writing suicide-themed notes. Alarmed, my mother took me to a counselor who told her, "You need to get Bryan involved in sports if you want him to be around and not in prison or dead somewhere."

My mom remarried when I was in sixth grade and told my stepdad they needed to put me in sports. I joined the Kailua Track Club.

In junior high and high school, the track became my sanctuary—the place where everything was perfect and right. But my success on the track didn't transfer to school.

I was still getting in trouble and fighting. We'd sneak off to the beach and drink alcohol and smoke marijuana. Then we'd go to school wasted.

We kept going to church, though, and I often asked God to forgive me.

At some point, I latched onto the goal of competing in the Olympics. I'd sign yearbooks with "2004" and Olympic rings. It helped maintain my popularity, but I never thought it would actually happen.

All through these years, my mom continually prayed for me. She said God told her I would go to the Olympics and win a gold medal one day.

In the summer after my junior year, I received letters from major universities asking me to attend. But a friend suggested Azusa Pacific University in Southern California. I was reluctant, but for some reason, I decided to attend APU on a track and field scholarship to do the decathlon.

For the first two years, I lived a double life. I would act righteous around some people, but as soon as the sun went down, it was time to have a good time.

During my freshmen year, I met Sarah Smith. She was a mature Christian, but fell in love with the guy I was showing her. Eventually, though, she discovered my double life and broke up with me. I was crushed because I knew this was the girl I wanted to marry.

That sent me into a spiral of depression, and I stopped eating for a time. I started praying like never before, promising God I would change my life if she would just call me. She did and came and picked me up to get something to eat. She said we couldn't get back together until I became the man of God she knew I really wanted to be.

I wrestled with the Lord and decided to begin going to the cafeteria early to pray and read the Bible. I asked one of my coaches to teach me how to be a man of God and joined his discipleship group.

Not long afterward, Sarah and I got back together. I made a heartfelt decision to follow Jesus and leave everything else behind. Since then, I've trained hard, dealt with injuries and setbacks and won two Olympic medals.

Today, I'm a father of three children and count it an honor to inspire kids to make wise decisions, develop good time management skills, stay in school and follow their dreams through the Bryan Clay Foundation.

I speak at churches, corporations and other places, telling the story of how God transformed an unruly, fist-fighting, pre-suicidal kid into a world champion.

—As told to Troy Anderson