

From Henry's Desk by Henry Holland

Sports, Polio, Lionel Trains and the Church

For the eleven years before I contracted polio I enjoyed and thrilled in participating in all types of sports. I preferred team competition over individual sports. I loved baseball, football and basketball which were the main sports for males in the 1940s. I also enjoyed running which I have written about in the past. In my backyard in the north side of Richmond I had a homemade basketball goal which was nailed to a large oak tree. My paternal grandfather and one of my uncles were excellent carpenters and constructed this goal for my friends and me. In school we often chose up sides and played sandlot baseball until the bell rang to begin school. In the fall when the leaves would be falling we would do the same thing with sandlot football. I thoroughly enjoyed all of these sports and was fairly good at them. I also was fast and enjoyed racing both sprints and longer races. I am delighted that I have vivid memories of all of these competitive sports activities. To this day I dream of them, only to wake up to reality.

On September 17, 1950 a micro organism named the poliovirus put a permanent end to my running and active participation in sports. After polio for two years I exercised and did everything imaginable in order to regain all of my strength in order to run again. I wanted to do what Wilma Rudolph later did in 1960 in Rome. However, the damage was too great and all I could do was find a way to compensate. I turned to coaching or counseling in sports. For seven summers while in high school, college and even one summer in medical school I was a counselor at a boy's day camp. I mostly coached baseball and basketball, but also running and archery. In college I coached my fraternity's intramural basketball team and I did the same thing for my medical class' intramural basketball team. In high school I was a spotter for the football team at all home games. A student from each school would help the public address announcer identify players from each team on each play. These students were called "spotters" and it was fun to do. In high school and college I covered sports for the school newspapers. The sports that I could still do despite polio were archery, table tennis and golf. I did these as often as I could. Once I got into the later years of medical school I no longer had time for sports participation. My two daughters have coached and my son is currently the swim coach at Randolph-Macon College in Ashland. All six of my grandchildren are active in sports.

At the conclusion of World War II I received my first Lionel electric train on Christmas 1945. One week after being discharged from the Medical College of Virginia Hospital in December 1950 I received my second Lionel electric train on Christmas day. For the next four years I continued to add to my Lionel trains. These marvelous toys became a healthy escape from the reality of my handicapped state. With the help of the same uncle mentioned previously I had a rather elaborate layout of Lionel trains. Two 4 X 8 pieces of ply board were connected at right angles. I learned a lot about electrical energy because of these trains. These trains were set up the better part of the winter during those years. At night time I could dim the lights in the train room and the various lights on the layout would come alive. I could make regular train

runs, see the crossing gates go down as the train passed, sound the whistle and even have smoke come out of the smoke stack on the steam engine. This was a time of pure pleasure and fantasy which provided a temporary escape from the realities of the damage of polio.

Most of the time during those adolescent years there was no real escape from the aftermath of polio. I sought a theological explanation to what had befallen me. There are many healings of paralytics recorded in the New Testament of the Bible, but I knew that such miraculous events did not occur in my neighborhood. I did begin attending a local protestant church. I felt welcome there again and the playing field seemed a little more level because there were other people with a broken spirit in my midst. This has been my experience through the years. The famous theologian Reinhold Niebuhr once described the church this way:

"The Church is curiously a mixed body consisting of those who have never been shaken in their self-esteem or self-righteousness and who use the forms of religion for purposes of self-aggrandizement; and of the true Christians who live by a "broken spirit and a contrite heart."*

We will soon be celebrating the holiday season that is religiously inspired. I hope most of you have vivid and joyous memories of your pre polio years. I hope you can be grateful for the inner strength you felt and experienced in living your life beyond polio. I would like to imagine that each of you found healthy paths of temporary escape from the reality of the damage of polio. I am confident that most of you looked beyond yourselves and found comfort in overcoming life's hardships. Post Polio Syndrome has also tested our resolve to find ways to overcome a broken spirit.

**The citation is found in Reinhold Niebuhr: His Religious and Political Thought, edited by Kegley and Bretall and published by MacMillan in 1961.*
