

Keeping a Promise to Mama

Gerald Harris, in his book, *Olympic Heroes, World Class Athletes Winning at Life*, tells the story of Mel Pender, whose life has been an unqualified success.

And it all began with a promise he made to his mother when he was just 16: "I'm going to do something with my life to make you proud of me."

Pender entered the Armed Forces right out of school and was sent to Okinawa. One day, his division had an opportunity to compete in a track meet with a division of Japanese and Okinawan soldiers. Pender, known for his incredible quickness in camp football games, was asked to sign up. Although he had no training in track, he agreed to try.



Pender won his event, and he discovered that he had a gift for speed and explosive starts. He went on to win many more track meets in Okinawa.

In 1961, Pender's division was given some time off to visit Tokyo, the future site of the 1964 Olympics. He continued his service in the Army, but devoted his free time to rigorous physical conditioning. Although he was gaining great respect as an athlete, as an African-American he faced much discrimination.

Once, when Pender was back in the United States and dressed in his military uniform, he was refused service at a restaurant, while the white man he was with was welcomed in. To be so blatantly discriminated against in his own country – the country that he was sacrificing to serve – affected Pender deeply.

Most of us would be demoralized and discouraged by such treatment, but it just increased Pender's resolve. He decided that he would have to achieve great things in order to buttress his sense of self-esteem. Later, in speaking of that painful experience, he noted, "In fact, that experience drew me closer to God."

As a man of deep faith, Pender determined that he would rise higher in the ranks and become a commissioned officer, and to pursue his dream of the Olympics. An injury kept him from the 1964 Games, but by the 1968 Olympics, he was ready.

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Those Games were not long after the assassinations of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert Kennedy. Race relations in the U.S. were in turmoil, and the pressure on African-American athletes was tremendous. There was even a push to boycott the Games. An outcry arose when Tommie Smith and John Carlos won the gold and bronze medals in their event, the 200-meter dash, and they raised their gloved fists in the air in a protest.

The U.S. Olympic Committee immediately took them off the team and removed them from the Olympic village. Pender wore black running shoes to protest their removal.

Nevertheless, the U.S. relay team, of which Pender was a part, set a new world record in the 400-meter relay and won the gold medal. Pender went on to serve in the International Track Association, to get a college degree, to reach the status of captain in the Armed Forces, to earn a Bronze Star in Vietnam, and to work as the head track coach at the U.S. Military Academy at West Point.

He had many more successes in his business and civic life – enough to serve anyone for three or four lifetimes. All because he made a promise to his mother and committed himself to keeping it.



Our character is forged and our character is revealed by the promises we make and the promises we keep – to a spouse, to defend the laws of our country, to be a dedicated associate of Life Care or Century Park, to be a faithful member of a church, and so on.

You shall be careful to do what has passed your lips (Deuteronomy 23:23 ESV).

– Beecher Hunter