Passing the torch: A series on Olympic truths

Collin was just 7 months old when the 2010 Winter Games were held in Vancouver. Now, at the age of 3, I feel obligated to explain the Olympics to him. So, I let him take a long nap on Friday so he could stay up to watch the opening ceremonies with me. (Relax – it's only every two years!)

I've only ever played on one sports team in my life (a disastrous tale for another time) and visited two countries other than my own (though I hope to change that). But, you don't need to be an athlete or a globetrotter to appreciate what the Olympics symbolize.

In explaining the meaning of these international games to Collin, I discovered some truth for myself.

Truth 1: The Olympic Games Tear Down Walls

What I'm about to admit is shameful, but I assure you the story ends better than it begins.

During London's opening ceremonies, I became upset when a choir of children from Northern Ireland began singing "Danny Boy" from the Giant's Causeway. Though the lyrics were written by an Englishman, the tune, itself, and everything the song represents belong to the Irish.

My family is of Irish descent. We share a passion for Irish history and culture. I told my boys they were Irish within their first few hours of life. Collin occasionally refers to himself as a leprechaun. He has a lot to learn about being Irish American. But, what should I tell him?

Historically speaking, the English weren't so kind to the Irish. Despite a short-lived boom in tourism in the late 20th century, Ireland hasn't fully recovered economically

or socially from the effects of colonial rule. Though a majority of the Emerald Isle has been independent for nearly a century, six northern counties remain a part of the United Kingdom, which causes a great deal of tension for some people.

Though I am an American, and over a hundred years and thousands of miles separate me from Irish citizenship, I still find myself becoming emotional when I consider the struggles my ancestors endured to get us to this point. “Danny Boy” always brings that out of me. Sometimes our wounds are deep-seeded, even if they’re secondhand.

“Do you hear that song, Collin?” I told him as the children’s choir hit the high note. “That belongs to our people.” My tone was not one of pride, but of defense. Without realizing it, I was teaching my son to divide rather than to share.

My frustration with the appropriation of the unofficial Irish anthem dwindled as I watched the Parade of Nations.

Athletes represented countries facing catastrophic economic collapse, ever-shifting borders, disappearing natural resources, public health epidemics, interim governments, state-sanctioned domestic violence, terrorism, genocide, and devastating, endless wars.

The nations that comprise the Holy Lands have known more days of war than of peace in their entire existence. Still, they managed to send their finest athletes to London, despite their present and past conflicts. We must never forget the tragedy that occurred at the 1972 Munich games, though we can hope and pray for a peaceful 2012 Olympics and continue to ask God to resolve Middle Eastern conflicts.

As Israel was introduced, I told Collin that it was a very important place to many people and that it was important to us because Jesus used to live there. That’s all he needs to know for now. As my children grow up, I will explain more.

Our own country is not without its problems. We haven’t fully abandoned our history of hatred for that we do not understand. Civil rights issues continue to plague certain groups of people. We are in a financial state of woe. I’ve seen the effects firsthand as I’ve taught many students living in poverty. We are haunted by tragic,

random acts of violence, such as the theater shooting in Aurora, Colorado. We are at war at home and on foreign soil.

America is far from perfect, but we're still quite fortunate as a nation. At the very least, we have the right to speak our minds.

Seeing Kobe Bryant and LeBron James representing Team USA together was particularly thrilling for me. I'm not a big basketball fan, but most of my students are and have divided their loyalties between the two superstars. The bickering over Lakers vs. Cavs (now Heat) got so intense sometimes that I'd physically separate kids during the NBA playoffs. At long last, LeBron earned his first championship this season, which will have some of my students bragging upon our return to school, while the others point out that he still needs four more rings to catch up to Kobe. To silence them (at least temporarily), I will point to the photo of the Team USA Basketball team I plan to hang on my wall and say one word, "teammates."

Regardless of the various forms of turmoil plaguing their nations and in spite of the obstacles in their paths to London, athletes representing all 204 countries marched in the Parade of Nations with pride and dignity. Their broad smiles and warm eyes told the world that they were leaving the problems of their homelands behind for the moment.

The members of the Independent Olympic Athletes team unified over the dissolution of their home countries. Rather than marching solemnly, they bounded joyfully through the arena. Collin smiled, giggled and bounced along. We all could learn a lesson from them about how to approach life.

Toward the end of the Parade of Nations, Irish rock band U2's "Where Streets Have No Name" began to play. I immediately thought of the Ravens, who use the song to introduce the team at home games.

"Where the Streets Have No Name" is about people coming together no matter where they are from. Next time you're walking into a Ravens game, think about that. People from Homeland could be having their tickets scanned beside people from Cherry Hill. Someone from Edmonson Village could be standing in line for a pretzel in front of someone from Canton. Though we may sit in different sections during the

game, we enter and leave the stadium in the same way. No matter which neighborhoods we return to, we are united as Ravens fans.

The irony is that other than being a Ravens anthem, “Where the Streets Have No Name” is an Irish song about the same religious and class struggles I discussed earlier. U2’s lead singer Bono is one of the most famous human rights activists in the world. Among many philanthropic ventures, he started (PRODUCT)red to raise awareness of and money for AIDS in Africa. Bono sees himself as a citizen of the world, and uses his music to unite people of different nations.

When I thought about Bono’s message, particularly as it relates to the Olympics, I felt ashamed for getting angry about “Danny Boy” being used by the Brits. He’s not mad about the Ravens using “Where the Streets Have No Name.” (I’m sure money exchanged hands for that to occur. But remember, he’s a charitable guy!) I don’t own “Danny Boy.” I’ve only ever lived in the US, not Ireland. I have no reason to be angry with England. In fact, I admire much of their culture. What was my problem?

Many of the nations attending the Olympics had once suffered under harsh British rule. Some of these countries still suffer as a result. But we need to stop blaming the descendents of oppressors for crimes against our ancestors. Rather than refusing to attend the Olympics, athletes from current and former colonies graciously accepted the invitation to compete in host city London. It’s forgiveness at its finest.

As “Where the Streets Have No Name” faded into “Beautiful Day,” I told Collin, “These songs came from Ireland, too. We’re lucky that music is such a big part of who we are. But, beautiful music comes from all over the world. God wants us to share our music with each other … even ‘Danny Boy.’”