


Virtue In Action

Champions of Virtue

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FOSTERING CITIZENSHIP THROUGH CHARACTER EDUCATION

A close-up photograph of Michael Phelps swimming in a pool. He is wearing a black swim cap and blue goggles, with his mouth open as if breathing. The water is splashing around him, and his reflection is visible in the calm water below.

Michael Phelps, Lopez Lomong and Leon Powe Jr. have much more in common than athletic excellence. These three men all became champions by aspiring to achieve greatness and by living out the virtues of perseverance and fortitude in maintaining an incredible work ethic in spite of significant obstacles.





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An American swimmer breaks a world record and elevates his sport to a new level. A Sudanese runner escapes life as a child soldier and joins Team USA. A California-born basketball player overcomes a broken home and crushing poverty to become an NBA standout.

Swimmer Michael Phelps, runner Lopez Lomong and Boston Celtics' Leon Powe Jr. – though from different walks of life – have much more in common than athletic excellence. These three men all became champions by **aspiring** to achieve greatness and by living out the virtues of **perseverance** and **fortitude** in maintaining an incredible work ethic in spite of significant obstacles. Lomong's life is also a great example of **citizenship**. As champions of athletics and the virtues these men serve as role models for us as we strive to attain our personal goals



Swimming toward Success: Michael Phelps

Images of Phelps emerging from the pool have

dominated the 2008 Olympics in Beijing. The 23-year-old swimmer with the goofy grin and chiseled muscles is the undeniable star of the competition, having this year broken the previous world record of 7 gold medals in one Olympics with an incredible eight gold medals.

His success is no surprise to those who have watched Phelps since he was 15 and was one of the youngest swimmers ever to compete in the international Olympics. “Michael is the most talented swimmer in the world,” Eddie Reese, head coach of the U.S. men’s Olympic swim team, told the New York Times. “The tough part for everyone else is he’s also the hardest-working. It’s a rare phenomenon. You never see it.”

Yet the swimmer who graces cereal boxes, magazine covers and is considered the “Michael Jordan” of his sport comes from humble beginnings in Baltimore, where he was mostly raised by a single mom, Debbie Phelps. But missing out on a father did not stop Phelps from pursuing his dream. From early childhood he has

been a fixture in the pool. Diagnosed with attention deficit disorder as a child, the place Phelps felt most at home was in the pool. So his mother encouraged his talent. By the age of 11, Phelps was talented enough to join a swimming team with much older athletes, up to age 17, who gave the young **prodigy** a hard time.

“The girls didn’t mind too much, but to the boys, it was like I was on their territory, and boys don’t like that,” Phelps told New York Times. “I got picked on some. It wasn’t anything big, but I would get frustrated. But it didn’t do what they wanted, which I guess, was to make me quit. It just made me swim faster.” His attitude in handling the moderate taunting is an example for us in how to **persevere** through obstacles and to actually turn these obstacles into positive motivation.

Phelps knew that achieving his goals would require absolute dedication and hard work. Phelps told the New York Times of his training regimen, “If you take a day off, it takes you two days to get back to where you were. That’s two days wasted, and you can never get those days back.” Phelps trains 6-days-a week, 5-hours-a-day. His typical week includes swimming an incredible 50 miles per week. Phelps is not perfect, and a few years ago, was arrested for driving while under the influence of alcohol. But instead of making excuses or ignoring his failing, he accepted **responsibility** for his actions, including apologizing to children he mentors at a Baltimore youth group and even calling the media himself to explain what happened and admitting his wrongdoing. Still, he never stopped believing in himself or focusing on what he does best. “If you sell yourself short, you never reach your potential,” Phelps told ESPN.

Hoop Dreams: Leon Powe, Jr.

Leon Powe Jr. is a Boston Celtics standout whose skills earned him the nickname “The Show.” In June, Powe unleashed a stellar, game-winning performance against the LA Lakers during the NBA finals. But Powe didn’t always have a storybook life. Powe spent most of his childhood homeless and, after being taken from his mother at age 14, entered the foster care system.

Powe’s father abandoned him at the age of two. When he was seven, his younger brother started a fire that destroyed the family’s home. The incident sparked a seven year-stint of homelessness for Powe and his family. His mother was unable to find well paying work and continued having children. These realities hit Powe particularly hard, as he found himself in the role of the

family caretaker. Powe missed the entire fifth-grade to care for his young siblings so that his mother could continue working; however, she was still only able to find low-paying jobs.

The experience, while burdensome, instilled within Powe a sense of **responsibility** in accepting the duties that life placed on him. Finally, in his pre-teen years he found a father figure that could help him with a budding interest in basketball. Powe approached Bernard Ward, the elder half-brother of a childhood friend at a neighborhood hangout. Ward, a former standout basketball player whose career was sidelined by an injury and brief stint as a drug dealer, was the man who could help Powe make it. “I was in the seventh grade when I ran into Bernard at Pak ‘N Save,” Powe told the East Bay Express about the reformed



man who would give him his own shot at greatness. “It had been a while since I had seen him, but I asked him what was happening and if he could work me out.”

Ward challenged Powe to run seven laps around a schoolyard and shoot hoops alone for an entire evening. Powe obeyed to the letter, even though he had no idea Ward was watching him from a car. Despite Powe’s impressive natural ability, he demonstrated **humility** in accepting Ward’s instruction and in continuing to execute the long and strenuous workouts that Ward demanded. Ward took Powe under his wing, coaching and mentoring him from eighth grade on.

Along the way, Powe also received an academic assist from Jonas Zuckerman, a teacher whom he had known

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as a child, and that had been enlisted by Ward to fill in the gaps from **sporadic** schooling. “What brought me in to helping Leon was how much and how hard he was willing to work,” Zuckerman told the East Bay Express.

Powe, Ward and Zuckerman made a great team. The talent and **generosity** of Ward and Zuckerman offered Powe an opportunity to succeed and to escape his crushing poverty. However, none of this would have mattered if Powe didn’t have the **fortitude**, the mental and emotional strength to follow the guidance of his mentors and to stay focused on attaining his goals. Fortunately Powe followed the game plan and succeeded in earning a position on UC Berkeley’s team and incredibly in the NBA.

Powe discussed his dedication and work ethic in a post-championship interview with Boston journalist John Gardella. “I don’t take nothing for granted,” the young player told Gardella. “I can’t speak for anybody else, but I appreciate [The Finals] a lot. Nothing is guaranteed. You never know when it can be taken away from you, and that’s why when I go out there and play, just treat every minute

like it’s my last and try to play 110 percent every time out.”

A “Lost Boy” Found: Lopez Lomong

It is no wonder that the LA Times newspaper proclaimed Lomong, 23, the “true spirit of the Olympics.” The soft-spoken 1500-meter runner had been selected by the U.S. team to be its **flag bearer** in the opening ceremonies, and it couldn’t have meant more to Lomong who loves our country and the opportunities it has given him.

“The American flag means everything in my life, everything that describes me, coming from another country and going through all of the stages that I have to become a U.S. citizen,” Lomong told the LA Times.

Lomong, a native of Sudan, had traveled long and hard to get to America, and it had nothing to do with the miles between his country and ours. Lomong, at 6, was snatched from his family at gunpoint. His country, Sudan, was enduring a brutal civil war and at times children were forced to join the rebel forces and fight. During this civil war 2 million people died and 27,000 boys were forcibly

tor from their families. Lomong escaped from the soldiers, but still separated from his family made his way to a refugee camp in Kenya where he spent 10 years doing grueling labor.

There, Lomong raked dirt among other odd jobs, earning the equivalent of less than five cents per day, according to LA Times columnist Helene Elliott who chronicled how Lomong spent some of the paltry money he earned to watch the Olympics on a grainy, black-and-white television. It was the year 2000 and Lomong was entranced by U.S. 400-meter Michael Johnson's performance; it gave him the desire to pursue a similar dream.

In 2001, a still-inspired Lomong penned an essay to U.S. officials describing his **aspirations**, what his life would be like if he could leave the camp and live with a foster family in New York. His wish was granted and Lomong moved to the United States, making good on his big dreams to be a runner by gaining admission to Northern Arizona University. By 2007, the runner with no high school running experience, handily won NCAA titles in the 1,500 outdoors and the 3,000 meters indoors. This year, he



participated in the 2008 Olympics.

Lomong has become a model **citizen** in expressing his gratefulness for the opportunities America has given him. Commenting on being chosen to carry the American flag, Lomong stated "This is another amazing step for me in celebrating being an American... Seeing my fellow Americans coming behind me [in the opening ceremony] and supporting me will be a great honor -- the highest honor."

Despite that honor, Lomong does not forget his own painful past and also works as a citizen of the world, using his visibility to promote **justice** for others who – like he once did—are suffering in the Sudan and especially in Darfur. Lomong is a member of Team Darfur, and in August, earned the distinction of being named the group's "Darfur Hero."

"I'm worried about the kids who are dying in Darfur and South Sudan," Lomong commented on blogdarfur.com. "The kids don't have the dream they could be Olympic athletes or doctors. I want those kids to reach what their dreams are."

While the majority of us will never compete in an arena of screaming fans like the athletes featured in this lesson, there is much we can take away from Michael Phelps, Leon Powe Jr. and Lopez Lomong. They have each shown perseverance and fortitude in overcoming hardship and working hard to achieve their goals, and in the process they have inspired all of us to aspire toward our own goals.

Vocabulary

Responsibility: accepting and meeting the demands of our duty in life, being accountable, pursuing excellence

Perseverance: Trying hard and continuously in spite of obstacles and difficulties

Aspire: to desire something strongly and to work very hard for it

Citizenship: the status of a citizen with respect to his duties, rights, and privileges; and having the desire to make his state/country a better place

Prodigy: a highly talented child or youth

Sporadic: occurring occasionally, singly, or in irregular or random instances

Generosity: giving freely of our own possessions, time and or talent to someone else

Humility: modest opinion of one's own position; an honest self appraisal of one's strengths and weaknesses; a lack of false pride

Fortitude: mental and emotional strength in facing difficulty, adversity, danger, or temptation

Justice: fair treatment, due reward or punishment in accordance with honor, standards, or law

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Lesson Goals:

- Build awareness of the power of the virtues of perseverance, fortitude, responsibility and work ethic in enabling athletes to achieve the highest levels of success
- Help students understand that it often takes the generosity and caring of others within an athlete's life to enable them to achieve success
- Inspire students to aspire toward noble goals and to become their personal best in all pursuits

Highlighted Virtues

Aspire: to desire something strongly and to work very hard for it

Responsibility: accepting and meeting the demands of our duty in life, being accountable, pursuing excellence

Perseverance: Trying hard and continuously in spite of obstacles and difficulties

Citizenship: the status of a citizen with respect to his duties, rights, and privileges; and having the desire to make his state/country a better place

Generosity: giving freely of our own possessions, time and or talent to someone else

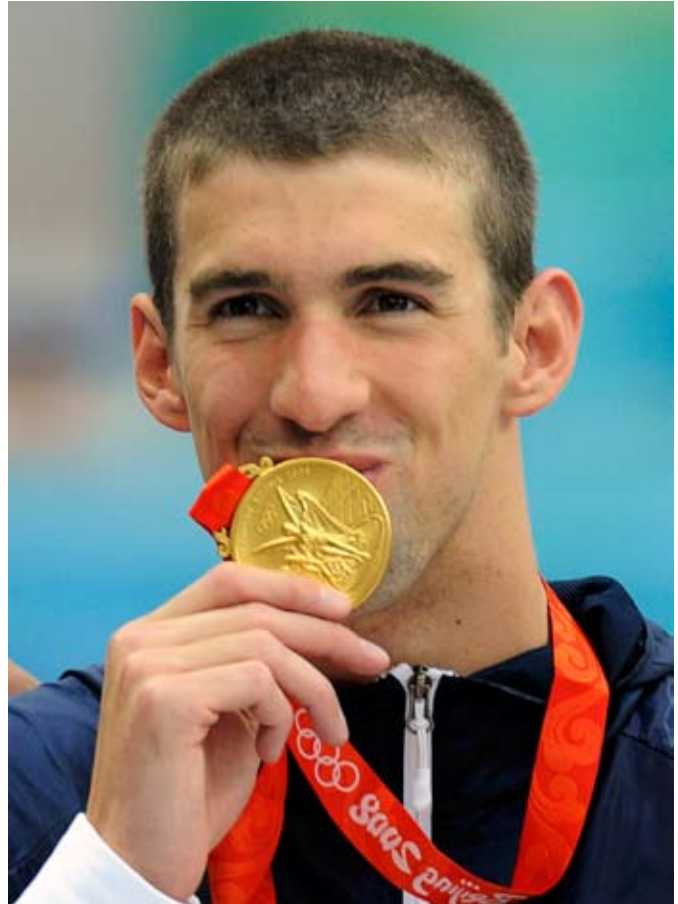
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Discussion Question Options:

1. What was significant about Michael Phelps' performance during the 2008 Olympics in Beijing?
2. How was Phelps bullied when he was 11? What effect did it have on his attitude toward his sport?
3. How did Phelps handle the failure of his DUI? What virtue did he live out in his approach to this mistake? How does his approach compare with other athletes and celebrities whom have had significant personal failures?
4. How did Leon Powe Jr.'s family end up homeless?
5. What individuals and specific virtues enabled Powe to work his way out of poverty and achieve his goals?
6. What significant role did Lopez Lomong play in the 2008 Olympics and why was that role particularly important to him?
7. What positive attributes does Lomong's story highlight about our nation?
8. How does Lopez Lomong fight for justice for others? What cause, mentioned in the lesson, is he a part of?
9. Name at least one hardship faced by each of the athletes featured in this lesson, and explain how they lived out perseverance and fortitude to overcome each hardship.



Journal Writing Options:

1. Write about the positive impact others have had in your life in motivating you, and in helping you to achieve a goal, and especially in striving to become a better person. Be specific in identifying the virtues that these other people have helped you develop or live out and you want to follow.
2. Sports require a great deal of discipline. Write about an area of your life that you are disciplined in, and what have you achieved as a result?

Extended Learning Activities:

1. Break the class into three groups and assign them one of the three athletes featured in this lesson. Have them work together to create an oral biography of the athlete and highlight how the athlete can be inspirational for others.
2. Have the class do some research and find an everyday person – either in the media or their community—who also embodies the virtues highlighted in this lesson. Ask them to demonstrate how these non-athletes are heroic in pursuing noble goals or possessing noble qualities, and how they can set an example for others.
3. Have the class break into three groups and research the civil war in Southern Sudan that rendered Lopez Lomong

GROUP 1: Present on the major factors behind the conflict, including the specific motivations for each party to the conflict.



GROUP 2: Present a timeline of the conflict and status of present efforts towards ending the conflict.

GROUP 3: Present on the various ways the conflict impacted the people of Southern Sudan, including deaths, physical destruction, lack of educational opportunities, and the refugee population.

Internet Resources

“Olympian’s Lopez Lomong’s Great Escape,” by Bill Dwyre (LA Times)
<http://www.latimes.com/sports/la-sp-olydwyre9-2008aug09,0,6100551.column?track=rss>

“The Making of Leon Powe,” by Lee Hubbard (East Bay Express)
http://www.eastbayexpress.com/gyrobase/the_making_of_leon_powe/Content?oid=284645&page=1

“Phelps enjoying the ride as he departs Olympics,” by Beth Harris and Paul Newberry (Associated Press)
<http://sports.espn.go.com/espn/wire?section=swimmin&id=3544120>

“Built to Swim,” by Michael Sokolove (The New York Times)
<http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9D0CEFDE163CF93BA3575BC0A9629C8B63>