

Excerpt from: Track & Field Self-Guided Workouts: Motivation and Activities

Louis Zamperini: Devil at His Heels

Louis Zamperini was a juvenile troublemaker that had a knack for getting into trouble, so his brother got him to go out for high school track. Louie ran the mile in 4:21.2 and set a new national high school record. He went to the University of Southern California and competed in the U.S. Olympic Trials in 1936. Louie finished second in the 5000 meters at the trials to qualify for the Olympics to be held in Berlin, Germany. He finished eighth in the Olympic 5000-meter final, running the last lap in a blazing 56 seconds, catching the attention of Adolf Hitler. Upon returning to college in 1938, Louie set a national collegiate mile record, which stood for 15 years. He was also a part of many national record-breaking relay teams. He may have broken the four-minute mile had he not joined the United States Army Air Force as a bombardier in the South Pacific during World War II.

Louie was deployed to Hawaii, and after flying a number of missions his aircraft was shot down. Louie and two other soldiers lived through the crash in the Pacific Ocean. The soldiers had hope that search planes would rescue them. Fighting storms, sharks, lack of drinking water and food, as well as enemy attacks, the soldiers drifted day after day on a small raft. After 47 days adrift in the ocean, the Japanese Navy rescued Louie and the only other surviving soldier. The Japanese held Louie in captivity in a brutal prisoner camp. One particular guard wanted to make an example of the eternally optimistic Olympic runner, and for two years the guard tried to break Louie's spirit with verbal and physical cruelty. He faced daily beatings, inhumane treatment, and lack of food. His weight dropped from 160 pounds before the plane crash to 67 pounds. The threat of mass execution was constant for two and a half years until the end of the war. He was listed as killed in action and his family feared he was dead. Despite all the difficulties, Louie focused on keeping his mind sharp and maintaining a positive spirit.

After the war was over, Louie returned to a hero's welcome but that did not last long. He had hopes of coming back to run in the Olympics again, but war injuries would not allow him to train. He constantly had bad nightmares and turned to alcohol.

His life changed when he met evangelist Billy Graham, who helped him launch a new career as a Christian inspirational speaker. One of his favorite themes was "forgiveness," and he visited many of the guards from his prison camp days to let them know that he had forgiven them.

Questions for Thought:

1. Louis Zamperini spent 47 days on a raft without food and water, but kept up his positive attitude. What can you learn from this story?
2. Often times, we think we have it tough. Does Louie's story make you believe you have it easy? How could you toughen up?
3. Louie forgave the guards that committed some of the worst war crimes in history. How do you rate your ability to forgive on a scale of 1-10 (10 high)?

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