

# SPRINTING TO

BY LINDSEY PHILLIPS



***Jason was willing to sacrifice the success he was having on the race track to serve a mission, but the Lord had other plans for him.***

*Jason's vision may be limited, but he hasn't lost sight of the need to serve.*

Jason Smyth, a member of the Londonderry Branch, Belfast Northern Ireland Stake, never dreamed of becoming a star athlete. In fact, the Northern Ireland teen always considered himself an average sportsman, perhaps even more so because he suffers from Stargardt's disease, a hereditary condition that has destroyed all but his peripheral vision.

However, at 16, Jason's hidden talent emerged and a PE teacher encouraged him to attend a sprinting training day. Eighteen months later Jason qualified for the Junior Commonwealth Games in Australia. The competition would be a turning point in his life.

"It was there I began to understand and realize what this was all about. For training so little and to qualify already, I just kind of thought I would like to make a career out of this," says Jason.

Now, three years later, Jason has made quite the career. He has won the 100m and 200m races at both the 2006 Paralympic Games in Holland and the 2005 European

Paralympic Championships in Finland, setting record times for both races in each competition. He also holds the Junior Irish record times for the 60m (6.91 seconds) and the 100m (10.61 seconds) races.

## **Another Kind of Mission**

Despite such success, as a 19-year-old, Jason heeded the prophet's counsel and applied to serve a mission. But, because of his visual impairment, his application was denied. Jason graciously accepted the decision and also accepted a new challenge: to find other ways to serve.

Jason's success as a sprinter has opened less conventional forms of missionary work.

"I now have an opportunity to be a missionary in a different way—through sprinting," says Jason.

He has found that rather than knocking on doors, he can bring the Church out of obscurity by sprinting past finish lines and setting new records, all the while setting a good example.

Already, Jason's success has created a buzz as others find out about the Mormon sprinter who doesn't train on Sundays and also abstains from tea, coffee, alcohol, and drugs.

SUCCESS





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His success has made him the subject of several media-related publications—including Ireland's biggest newspaper. Many mention his Mormon lifestyle.

"When they get to know me, they know the way I live my life is different," Jason says.

### **Balancing Act**

Jason competes in both outdoor and indoor competitions, so he trains virtually all year. His practices usually last up to two hours and are twice a day.

Then there's the travel. In the last three years, Jason has visited countries such as China, Finland, Portugal, Sweden, Holland, and Hungary. Last spring he spent time training at Brigham Young University in Provo, Utah.

With increased success, doors continue to open for Jason. Last year he received an Irish Sport Grant, which enabled him to employ a full-time coach and secure sponsorships.

With each success, Jason has to give more time and energy. He understands what is expected of him. "It is my career," he says.

### **Finding Strength through Church and Family**

Though training and racing keep him busy, Jason makes sure that his free time is reserved for his family, which Jason says is the root of his success.

"My family had a big part to play in the start. They encouraged me to keep up sprinting and see how I do. They take me to training and watch me race," he says.

In addition, Jason also finds strength in the Church.

Although the Church is relatively small in Northern Ireland, Jason has inherited Irish

pioneer heritage. His grandparents were baptized in Ireland in 1957, and his parents have remained strong in their membership.

Jason continues to build on this heritage. Even though he was the only member in his school, he graduated from seminary through independent study. He also finds time to serve as a branch missionary.

He credits his strong testimony of the gospel to his family, especially his parents.

"My parents taught us by example the way to live our lives," he says.

Jason also mentioned that attending Church activities and socializing with friends who lived the same principles are another source of strength for him. "People at my branch are very supportive of me," Jason says. "They like seeing me do well."

### **Long-Term View**

As for his future, Jason's long-term goal is to qualify for the London Olympics in 2012. But for now, Jason just wants to secure a second consecutive championship at the 2008 Paralympics in Beijing and to qualify for the Under-23 Championships in Hungary this July.

Jason says that one of his greatest achievements so far is making a life out of something he enjoys. He has learned to be self-sufficient and feels he has matured through his experiences.

"Being able to travel the world and getting paid to run—for me, nothing is better," he says.

For Jason, the experience has been a powerful lesson that with a lot of hard work and dedication, anyone can achieve their dreams. "You just have to work hard if you really want it—and enjoy it as well," he says. **NE**

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For more on serving despite challenges, read "Determined to Serve," *New Era*, Mar. 2007, p. 48.