

## OLYMPICS PREVIEW

# Faith is source of strength for wrestling champion

Olympic wrestler Kyle Snyder says his Catholic faith helps him grapple with the pressure of competing

By Kelly Seegers  
Catholic Standard

**K**yle Snyder's knack for making history began during his junior year of high school, when he helped win the first-ever state championship for the wrestling team of Our Lady of Good Counsel in Olney. In March 2015, Snyder helped Ohio State win their first NCAA title at the national championship, and in September of that same year, Snyder became the youngest world champion in the history of U.S.A. wrestling. Now, he is hoping to continue this streak at the 2016 Summer Olympics in Rio de Janeiro.

Snyder, whose family attends St. Joseph Parish in Sykesville, started wrestling when he was five years old, and said that he first dreamed of being in the Olympics when he was about to enter high school at Good Counsel. When he was a sophomore in high school, the password on his phone was "2016", as a way of motivating him to become an Olympic champion in 2016.

After his junior year at Good Counsel, Snyder left to spend his senior year at the Olympic Training Center in Colorado. Now a rising junior at Ohio State, he still returns to visit Good Counsel, and when he does he often uses their weight room and stops to talk to some of his teachers.

Snyder created a "Go Fund Me" account in order to raise money for his family to travel to Rio to watch him compete, and he said that people from the Good Counsel community played a large part in the fundraising. Due to Snyder's love for the school, Good Counsel will be hosting the Ohio State vs. University of Maryland wrestling match in the upcoming season.

"I love Good Counsel. I was able to make some great friends not only with the students but the teachers and administration," Snyder said. "While I was there it was awesome for me academically and athletically and spiritually, getting to learn more about Christ."

Snyder said he relies on his faith to help him cope with the pressure that may come from competing. "Knowing that [God] has a plan for me has always helped me live a stress-free and worry-free life," he said.

He believes that we should value effort and improvement over winning and accolades, "because those are the things you can control."

Soon after winning a gold medal at the wrestling championships, Snyder returned to Good Counsel to give a speech at one of the school's Wednesday morning assemblies in



PHOTOS COURTESY OF OUR LADY OF GOOD COUNSEL HIGH SCHOOL

Kyle Snyder speaks at an assembly at Our Lady of Good Counsel High School in Olney last year. The former Good Counsel student is a world champion wrestler who will be competing in the Olympic Games in Rio de Janeiro in August.

September 2015, where he spoke about the importance of hard work. He told the students a story about a younger wrestler asking him for advice. Snyder told him to "believe in the process and consistently work as hard as you can," but it looked like that wasn't what the boy was looking for – he was looking for a magic answer on how to get to the top.

"There really is no silver bullet or magic behind becoming successful in whatever you want to do," Snyder told the students. "It takes a lot of hard work, a lot of consistent hard work... It takes a long time, a lot of believing in yourself, believing in the people that surround you and always looking toward that end goal and knowing that one day you are going to reach it."

Snyder also spoke about his growing faith and encouraged students to ask questions in religion class and get to know Jesus before they go to college.

"More important to me than consistently working hard and believing in yourself and setting goals and stuff like that is thanking God," Snyder said.

At the end of his speech, the school surprised him by presenting him with an honorary diploma.

Snyder has found a strong faith community among the other Olympians, and when he was at the Olympic Training Center, the coaches there started taking him to Bible studies. It was during that time that his passion for learning about Christ grew.

"As athletes, I think especially at a high level...there can be a lot of pressure on you to succeed... I know my faith has just allowed me to live freely in those moments," Snyder said. "I still get a little bit nervous moments before my match, but not as much as I used to. It has just allowed me to open up more and face becoming the best wrestler than I can be and

the best athlete and best person I can be because that is what God has called us to do. To be Jesus-like is what the ultimate goal is and you can chase that personally, as an athlete, in your community, and in everything you do."

"It (my faith) has just allowed me to open up more and face becoming the best wrestler than I can be and the best athlete and best person I can be because that is what God has called us to do."

**KYLE SNYDER**

Olympic wrestler and former Good Counsel student

While he admits, "everybody's goal is to win," Snyder's attitude going into the Olympic games in Rio reflects his trust in God and value of hard work over accolades.

"I want to compete as hard as I can and try to wrestle to the best of my ability," Snyder said. "If I do that, then the rest will take care of itself."

(Snyder will be competing in men's freestyle wrestling on the morning of Aug. 21, beginning with the elimination rounds at 7:30 a.m. ET. It will be streamed online at [www.nbcolympics.com](http://www.nbcolympics.com).)



Kyle Snyder, holding his honorary diploma from Our Lady of Good Counsel, stands with his former wrestling coach there, Skylar Saar.



## OLYMPICS PREVIEW

# Before jumping into the Rio Olympics, Thea LaFond stops to thank God

By Kelly Seegers  
Catholic Standard

**W**hen Thea LaFond, a parishioner at St. John the Evangelist Parish in Silver Spring, found out that she would be headed to Rio de Janeiro to represent her home country, the Commonwealth of Dominica, in the 2016 Summer Olympics, the first thing she did was thank God and ask Him, “How did you do this, God? How did this happen?”

It happened because LaFond tried different things, listened to advice, relied upon God and worked hard to achieve her goals, but her route to the sport of track and field was not direct. She was originally a dancer, and had been doing ballet, tap and jazz since she was seven. When she was 13, she had to stop because her family could no longer afford it. In order to fill that void, she turned to high school sports.

LaFond joined the volleyball team at John F. Kennedy High School in Silver Spring her freshman year, and when the winter season rolled around, she asked if she could manage the basketball team. The coach said no, because he thought she looked too athletic for that. It was eventually her friends who convinced her to try track, and when she showed up for her first practice, she began by joining the distance runners. The coach said, “Let’s try something else,”

and told her to watch and copy another runner who was doing hurdles. That began the jumping career that would lead her to competing in the women’s triple jump in Rio.

LaFond was first inspired to go to the Olympics when she saw Usain Bolt, a sprinter from Jamaica, succeed during the 2008 Beijing Olympics. She had just started running track, but she still thought, “This could be me one day.”

“This man from an island in the Caribbean, Jamaica, grew up very humbly, but he had a gift,” LaFond said. “He held to his hard work and all that dedication, and you saw the sacrifice. I think that is what drew me to it all.”

When she was a senior in high school, her lifting coach told her that due to her dual citizenship, she could be competing for Dominica in junior national competitions. She took his advice, and since then she has had the opportunity to travel to places

like El Salvador and Jamaica to compete.

While she was just shy of the qualifying mark for the Olympics, each country is entitled to have two athletes – one male and one female – and since Dominica only had a male entrant, the Olympic Committee accepted LaFond to be the female competitor. She now makes up half of Dominica’s Olympic team.

LaFond has dedicated herself to a grueling training schedule, which included practicing the triple jump in the snow at eight o’clock at night, but said she couldn’t have done it without God and the people who have been praying for her.

“All I have been doing is thanking God, because I couldn’t have done it without Him,” LaFond said. “I mean the amount of people praying for me...it almost feels like success was inevitable.”



PHOTOS COURTESY OF THE UNIVERSITY OF MARYLAND

Thea LaFond participates in a track and field event for the University of Maryland. She graduated from the university in 2015.

LaFond is particularly grateful for the support that the St. John the Evangelist community has given her. Throughout high school, LaFond volunteered to teach 8th grade CCD with Peg Daly, who was always keeping up with her track career and telling her, “Hey, I’m praying for you.” LaFond said these reassurances somehow always came after a difficult week, even though Daly didn’t know it, because “she just had this sixth sense about her.”

When LaFond got the e-mail confirming she was going to the Olympics, she was sitting in her room and could hear her mom praying down the hall. She called out to tell her mom the good news, and the first things that her mom said were, “Praise God. Text Miss Daly.”

Leading up to getting the news that she would be competing in the Olympics, LaFond had been struggling with an injured heel. She would often be limping off of the track in pain, but knew that she had to keep getting jumps in if she was going to qualify for the Olympics. She recalls praying to God exactly a week before she qualified, asking Him what she should do about the injury, and whether or not she should just stop for the season.

“He came back one week to that date and answered things for me,” LaFond said. The news that she would be going to the Olympics allowed her to take some time off to rest and recuperate, and when she went back to practice for the first time, she was able to jump with very little pain.

Conversations between LaFond and God are commonplace, because from a young age her parents instilled in her that prayer is not something that is formal.

“While He is high up there and all powerful and all mighty, you can still talk to God like He is your best friend,” LaFond said.

LaFond was also a part of the track and field team at the University of Maryland, where she graduated from in 2015. She received a scholarship to attend the school, which she was grateful for, because it gave her the opportunity to save her parents some money that she had seen them work so hard for ever since they all moved to the United States when she was six years old.

“They weren’t always able to give me what I wanted, but they were able to give me what I needed, and I was able to

get them a few things in return...this sport was able to do that for me,” LaFond said.

While at Maryland, LaFond said she found a “second home” at the Catholic Student Center, where she would go to Adoration or Wednesday night Mass and dinner. She started bringing her other Catholic teammates with her to Mass, and before long, “I had my own little crew going to Mass with me on Sunday.”

“Having communities like that that always support you is just unbelievable,” LaFond said. “Because no matter where you go, you may not have biological family, but there is a Catholic church almost everywhere on this planet and you will find a support system within those walls.”

LaFond still has family in Dominica on her mom’s side, but a lot of them have also moved away. She thinks her family is even more excited than she is about her competing in the Rio Olympics.

“...for all our family around the world, they are around the world because they got up and left in search of something more,” LaFond said. “And if I am a representation of that more that is achievable and attainable, all glory to God.”

*(The qualifying round of the women’s triple jump will take place on Aug. 13 at 8:30 a.m. ET, and the final round will take place on Aug. 14 at 7:20 p.m. ET. They will be streamed online at <http://www.nbcolympics.com/>.)*

## Good Counsel’s Conger to swim at Olympics

Jack Conger, a graduate of Our Lady of Good Counsel High School in Olney, will also be competing in the 2016 Summer Olympics. Now a rising senior at the University of Texas, Conger will be swimming in the 800 freestyle relay race for the USA swimming team on Aug 9. Conger, a member of St. Patrick Parish in Rockville, will be featured in an upcoming edition of the *Catholic Standard*.



## CATHOLIC SCHOOLS

# Gold medal selfie

Katie Ledecky visits Stone Ridge and Little Flower before heading to Stanford



CS PHOTO BY JACLYN LIPPELMANN

Katie Ledecky takes a selfie with students at Stone Ridge School of the Sacred Heart in Bethesda after speaking at a school assembly on Sept. 2.

**By Kelly Seegers**  
Catholic Standard

In between her busy schedule of buying bedding for her dorm, throwing out the first pitch at Nationals Park, and meeting Bruce Springsteen backstage, Olympic gold medal swimmer Katie Ledecky made time to return to her two alma maters in the Archdiocese of Washington – Little Flower School and Stone Ridge School of the Sacred Heart in Bethesda.

She visited the lower and middle school students at Stone Ridge on Aug. 25, Little Flower School on Aug. 31, and the upper school at Stone Ridge on Sept. 2. At each gathering of students, cheers erupted as Ledecky entered the gymnasium wearing her five Olympic medals. Ledecky won gold in the 200-, 400-, and 800-meter freestyle races, gold in the 4x200 freestyle relay, and silver in the 4x100 freestyle relay. She began by thanking the communities for their support during the 2016 Summer Olympics in Rio de Janeiro, and followed by opening up the floor for the students to ask her questions.

On Aug. 25, the first question that she was asked was, “How do you swim that fast?” To which Ledecky responded, “A lot of hard

work.”

The students proceeded to ask questions about whether the water was cold (she said it was, but they like it that way), what her diet included (she eats pasta before races), and whether she got to meet Al Roker and Michael Phelps’ son, Boomer (yes and yes). Some students had comments, such as, “Your medals are shiny,” or a simple wish of “Congratulations.”

One girl asked Ledecky how it felt to be an inspiration to kids their age.

“It is an honor,” Ledecky responded. “It is something I don’t take lightly. I try to be a good role model.”

Ledecky told the students that her biggest piece of advice was to set big goals.

“When I was your age I never thought I would go to the Olympics,” Ledecky said.

But, she started setting goals at a young age, and all of a sudden when she was 14, her goal was to go to the Olympics. In 2013, she set three more goals for the Rio Olympics: to break a 3:46 in the 400-meter freestyle, to break 8:05 in the 800-meter freestyle, and to win the 200-meter freestyle race. She accomplished all three, which she had once thought of as unrealistic.

“It is a really good feeling to meet your goals,” Ledecky said. “Especially when they

are really big goals that you think are out there.”

Catherine Ronan Karrels, the Head of School at Stone Ridge, asked her what she learned from Stone Ridge that has helped her.

“The biggest thing I learned from Stone Ridge is how to help other people,” Ledecky said, and continued to talk about the school’s emphasis on service and how she learned the importance of being there for your friends.

“I know I have friends from Stone Ridge that I’ll have for the rest of my life,” she said.

After speaking with the lower and middle school students on Aug. 25, Ledecky made her way from the Stone Ridge gym to the preschool, where kids came up to her and gave her pieces of paper with marker scribbled on them, telling her that they drew pictures for her.

She asked the kids what their favorite part of the Olympics was, and they all yelled out, “the swimming!” One kid kindly told her, “You’re a good swimmer.” Ledecky said thank you and, “I bet you’re a good swimmer, too!”

One by one, many of the kids proudly told Ledecky about their own accomplishments in the pool, exclaiming things such as “I can

dive on the diving board!” and “I’ve taken lots of swimming lessons!” At Little Flower, kids were equally proud of their swimming accomplishments, and one kid told her that he swam in an 11-foot deep pool. Another kid said, “I want to swim in the Olympics.”

“I’ll be cheering for you,” Ledecky responded. “Maybe we’ll even be on the team together.”

When one student asked if he could have a medal, and Ledecky told him, “You’ll have to earn it. Is that a deal?”

Some Little Flower students asked Ledecky why the water in Rio was so green and how many miles per hour she swam. She referred them to their math and science teachers to get those questions answered.

Ledecky concluded the assembly at Little Flower by encouraging the students to “Find something you really love” and “work hard in that thing.”

“We don’t give out those beautiful medals, but you do get a wonderful sense of accomplishment” from working hard at school, said Immaculate Heart of Mary Sister Rosemaron Rynn, the principal of Little Flower. She presented Ledecky with a small cardinal figurine, which is the mascot

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# CATHOLIC SCHOOLS



CS PHOTO BY JACLYN LIPPELMANN

Katie Ledecy answers questions from students at Little Flower School in Bethesda.

of the school and the color of Stanford University, where Ledecy will soon begin college.

At the assembly with the Stone Ridge Upper School, Ledecy welcomed the new freshmen to Stone Ridge, telling them to “enjoy every moment” because “it goes by fast.”

“I don’t think I could have done the things I did over the past four years without going to Stone Ridge,” she said.

Ledecy gave the girls a picture of what life was like during the Olympics, saying, “I forgot how special the Olympics are until I got to Rio.”

She enjoyed the moments where she got to meet people from all over the world and trade pins or talk over a shared meal

in the cafeteria of the Olympic village. She met a Swiss golfer who is going to be her classmate at Stanford, and shared a suite with Lia Neal, another Olympic swimmer who is an alumna of the Convent of the Sacred Heart, a school in New York City.

Ledecy said that those experiences are what the

Olympics are all about: “Bringing the world together and meeting new people.”

While she enjoyed meeting people from all over the world, some of her favorite memories are of her time with her teammates from the United States. Since the team had to practice staying up late at training camp, they

would play board games like Bananagrams and do duets on the piano to pass the time and keep them awake.

Ledecy said her suite of female Olympians were competing with a mens’ suite that included Phelps and Ryan Lochte to see who could win the most medals. It was a friendly competition, since Ledecy said her favorite part of the Olympics was, “watching my teammates do things that they didn’t think were possible.”

Ledecy passed on some words of wisdom about school to students of every age. To the younger students, she told them to “work hard” and “listen to your teachers.” To the older students, she advised them not to spend their free periods watching Netflix, but to use the time wisely to get work done, as she had done to avoid staying up late before early morning swim practices.

At the conclusion of each assembly, Ledecy stood near the exit of the gym to greet the students

one by one and let them see the medals that she wore. Some students stopped for autographs, high fives and hugs as well.

During her visit to Little Flower, Ledecy said as she stood on the medal stand, receiving her medals, she thought about all of the people who helped her get there, including people from Little Flower and Stone Ridge. In an interview with the *Catholic Standard*, Ledecy said the thing she would miss most about this area as she left for Stanford is the people.

“I just am a part of such great communities; Stone Ridge, Little Flower, everybody in Bethesda,” Ledecy said. “But I’ll be back and I’ll get to see everyone every couple months.”

In an e-mail interview with the *Catholic Standard* before this year’s Olympics, Ledecy said the “faith-filled education” she received at both Stone Ridge and Little Flower “has facilitated my interest in the world and in serving others, and has enriched my life so that it is not solely focused on my swimming and athletics.”

When asked what she had been praying for during the Olympics, Ledecy told the *Catholic Standard*, “I was just praying to do my very best to represent my country, and I always just use my faith to think, ‘I have been given this gift, and I want to use it to the best of my ability... and hopefully inspire somebody or make an impact of some sort beyond just getting a good time (in my race) or getting a gold medal.’”

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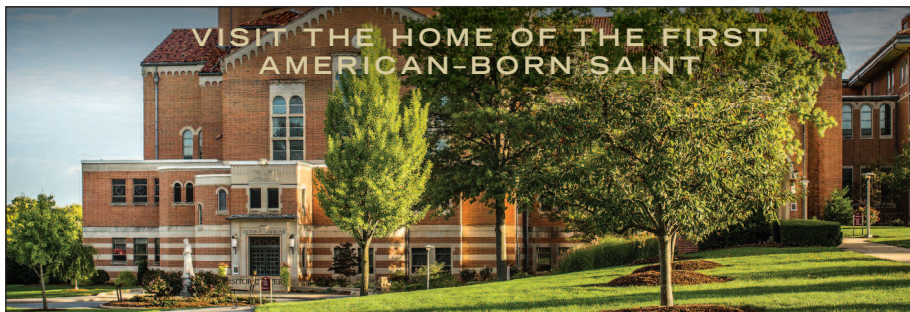
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