

# Former Olympian on spiritual quest to recruit priests for the Diocese of Rockville Centre

November 8, 2014 by BART JONES / [bart.jones@newsday.com](mailto:bart.jones@newsday.com)



Joseph Fitzgerald competed in the 1996 Olympics in Atlanta and for a decade traveled the globe to 50 countries as part of the U.S. national team handball squad. For a while, he even played professionally in Sweden.

Today, the North Babylon native is on a different mission. Ordained a Roman Catholic priest in 2007, he is head of vocations for the Diocese of Rockville Centre, entrusted with recruiting men to the priesthood at a time when they are sorely needed.

It's been an amazing journey for Fitzgerald, 43, who recalls entering the stadium at the Opening Ceremony of the 1996 Olympics surrounded by famous athletes such as Shaquille O'Neal.

"I remember high-fiving some of the greatest athletes in the world," Fitzgerald said. "It was surreal. It was spiritual. It was powerful."

Rosemary Sullivan, executive director of the Huntington-based National Conference of Diocesan Vocation Directors, said while some Catholic vocations directors in the United States have unusual backgrounds, Fitzgerald is the only one she knows of who is an Olympian.

"Joe Fitzgerald is great," Sullivan said. "He's balanced, he's energetic. He's a joyful priest."

His Olympic past has caught the attention of more than a few candidates for the priesthood.

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"It just made him one of these cool guys," said Joseph Catafago, 20, of Hicksville, who now is at the minor seminary of the Immaculate Conception Center in Douglaston, Queens, preparing for the priesthood.

He "was really someone who helped me find my own identity," Catafago said, recalling his years at Holy Trinity Diocesan High School in Hicksville, where Fitzgerald served as chaplain

and coached the freshman football team.

Fitzgerald, while proud of his Olympic experience, doesn't make it a centerpiece of his identity these days.

"I don't bring forth the Olympics first. I try to bring forth Jesus," he said. "The Olympics might be a way to bring people to Jesus. The fact that I'm an Olympian . . . that's attractive to people."

## **Twin paths**

His dual paths have made for some unusual juxtapositions. At one point, when Fitzgerald's sports career and search for God still overlapped, officers from the U.S. Anti-Doping Agency, the national anti-doping organization for Olympic, Paralympic and Pan American sports, showed up at the Douglaston seminary to carry out a random test.

He also arranged for the U.S. national handball team to live and train at the seminary in the summer of 2002. They did it again at the Seminary of the Immaculate Conception in Huntington in the summer of 2003, when he was a seminarian there and still was the team's captain.

Before he entered the minor seminary, Fitzgerald was engaged to be married, but he broke it off -- a decision, he said, that he still believes was right.

Today, he has his work cut out for him as vocations director, a job Fitzgerald said he initially was reluctant to take.

The number of men entering the priesthood has dropped nationwide since its peak in the late 1960s. The Diocese of Rockville Centre now has 391 priests, compared with 568 in 1970, according to The Official Catholic Directory, an authoritative source. That includes active and retired priests, as well as diocesan priests and those of religious orders. The diocese currently has 31 seminarians, an increase from the 17 when Fitzgerald first entered the major seminary and a number he sees as hopeful.

The importance of recruiting men to the priesthood is put in the spotlight annually. Today marks the end of National Vocation Awareness Week, sponsored by the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops.

## **'I'm competitive'**

Fitzgerald has a vigorous, optimistic outlook, with some help from humor. "When I see priests from our diocese and from other places, the first thing they say is, 'I'm sorry. You have the worst job in the diocese,'" he said only half-jokingly.

He is not caught up in the numbers -- after all, he said, "Jesus did it with 12" -- but he does not ignore them either.

"I'm an Olympic athlete," he said. "I'm competitive. I want to be the best. I want to be the top."

Fitzgerald grew up in a Catholic family, the third of four children and an altar boy at St. Joseph's parish in Babylon. The family was heavily into sports, and he played everything: baseball, football, basketball, hockey. He was introduced to team handball by his older brother, Tom, and by gym teachers at North Babylon High School.

At Ithaca College, he played baseball and football, with the latter team winning the Division III national championship. After graduation in 1993, he was recruited to join the U.S. national team handball squad, and three years later he was in the Olympics as a center back. His brother,

Tom, now 48, was on the team too.

Of some 150 national team handball squads in the world, the U.S. team was among 12 that qualified for the 1996 Olympics. It finished ninth.

Following the Olympics, Fitzgerald played professionally in Sweden for six months. After that he mainly taught school on and off in North Babylon and in Georgia to pay the bills while he trained and competed.

### **Drawn by another force**

During his world travels, he found a certain fame -- and the things that go with it.

"All the temptations that professional athletes have today, whether it be the girls, the drinking, all that kind of stuff out there, it was there for me as well," he said. "Sometimes that's easy to walk away from; sometimes it's not."

His mind and heart, all the while, were being pulled by another force. As the national team visited Iceland, South America, Europe, Japan, Korea and other places, Fitzgerald made it a point to attend Mass at a local Catholic parish. Though he did not understand the languages, "I knew the Mass," he said. "There was something powerful about that."

In 2001, at age 30, he entered the minor seminary in Douglaston, though he was not entirely sure about priesthood.

"I'm going to be honest -- when I went in, I was kind of like, yeah, you know, I'll give this a year," he said.

Fitzgerald still was playing handball, and that year was named national player of the year. But his resolve to continue studying for the priesthood was stronger, and he continued to the major seminary in Huntington.

### **'A more important calling'**

In 2003, at the Pan-American Games in the Dominican Republic, he was on the U.S. team that won the bronze medal.

That was his final high-level tournament. He took off his shoes and left them on the court.

"I said, 'It's over. I have a more important calling. I need to focus completely on the seminary,' " Fitzgerald recalled.

After his ordination in 2007, he spent two years serving at St. Kilian parish in Farmingdale, and then became an assistant to the diocese's vocations director. He also was assigned to work as a chaplain at Holy Trinity High School and at Hofstra University.

Bishop William Murphy appointed him to take over the vocations post in June 2013 after the former director was assigned to a parish.

Fitzgerald said he continues to grow into the job. While his focus is on Jesus and the church, he never will forget his days as an Olympic athlete. He still plays handball, on a team for the New York Athletic Club in Manhattan. He is the club's chaplain.

Whatever success he has in guiding men to the priesthood, Fitzgerald said, the church will remain strong.

"The church is not just the priests," he said. "The church is the people of God."

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