

Joseph Fitzgerald's extraordinary journey from Olympian to priest

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People

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(C) Rev. Joseph H. Fitzgerald

Joseph Fitzgerald was an Olympic athlete who felt a calling to do more.

Courtesy St. William the Abbot R.C. Church

Joseph Fitzgerald was an Olympic athlete — but he had a calling to do more.

Every week, the Rev. Joseph Fitzgerald, 53, officiates masses at Seaford's St. William the Abbot R.C. Church. The road to his calling has been eventful, to say the least.

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Born in Brooklyn, Fitzgerald and his family moved to North Babylon when he was six years old. Throughout his childhood, Fitzgerald sank his teeth into sports and was an active parishioner. While attending North Babylon High School, Fitzgerald's athletic talents began to take off, as he earned All-County honors in football, basketball and baseball.

"When I was in high school ... I just progressed," Joseph Fitzgerald said. "I was able to run faster and jump higher. I was looked at by a few [NCAA] Division I colleges but landed on Ithaca College. It's a Division III school, but it was a very high level."

Fitzgerald played baseball at Ithaca for two years but excelled at football. In 1991, he quarterbacked the Bombers to a national championship, earning himself a spot in Ithaca's 2017 Athletic Hall of Fame class.

After graduating in 1993, Joseph Fitzgerald's handball career began. Though handball is not big in America, Fitzgerald and his brother, Tom, learned they had a knack for the game in a simple way.

"We played handball in high school because it was in the gym curriculum," Fitzgerald said. "There was a team called the Garden City Handball Club based out of Adelphi University, and during the late '80s, I practiced and developed there. A lot of players played in previous Olympics."

While playing other sports, Fitzgerald simultaneously honed in on his handball skills as a middle back. In 1993, he and Tom made the United States' national team en route to competing in Atlanta for the 1996 Olympic Games.

"I was walking into the opening ceremonies with guys from the Dream Team and other high-profile people," Fitzgerald said. "I'm high fiving my brother and we're pinching ourselves, 'how did these two knuckleheads from the south shore of Long Island end up representing the United States of America in the greatest sporting event in history?'"



Joseph Fitzgerald waves to the crowd at the 1996 Summer Olympic Games. Courtesy St. William the Abbot R.C. Church

During Fitzgerald's decade-long professional career, he visited more than 50 different countries, was named the 2001 USA Team Handball Athlete of the Year and captured a bronze medal at the Pan American Games in 2003. After playing in Sweden for a year to end his career, Joseph Fitzgerald began to wonder, "What now?"

With a history degree at his disposal, Fitzgerald taught at North Babylon High School. Upon moving to Georgia, he left public school teaching to train for a better-paying corporate job. Since his workload diminished, Fitzgerald volunteered at church in his free time.

“I felt God saying, ‘I’ve got more for you,’” Fitzgerald said. “I entered the seminary in Queens on my 30th birthday; thirteen days later, a plane flew over it and went into the World Trade Center. It became a moment where I said, ‘I have been blessed in my life, and I have received or even taken a lot. How can I give back?’ That’s when I knew I was doing the right thing.”

This past summer, Joseph Fitzgerald had the opportunity to blend his two passions. He was invited to Paris for the Olympic Games as a part of the “The Holy Games” initiative, which aimed to strengthen the bond between faith and sports. He also helped athletes navigate through depression that can occur following years of hard work being fulfilled.

Despite receiving a plethora of accolades in sports, Joseph Fitzgerald values helping people and his relationship with God above all else. That is evident in his Masses, as he tries to portray himself as relatable as possible by showing his imperfections.

“I don’t want people in church to have the sense that God is so far away, that they really can’t relate to him,” Fitzgerald said. “I present myself as a work in progress because the Gospel message is about hope. I try to convey that my family and I are a mess, but we’re trying our best and God is with us in the midst of all that.”

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