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## After the race: Thoughts on Soldier Homecomings

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HONOLULU -- Maybe it's the Olympics... maybe it's the fact that replacements are already starting to train up for deployment to the Middle East... or maybe it's just that it seems like spring was a long time ago. At any rate, I've found myself thinking a lot recently about redeployment. I figured if I was thinking of the troops coming home, you must be too. These things: the glory of Olympic gold at the end of a tough race, the reassurance that help is on the way, and the simple passage of time, all tend to highlight the fact that at some point in the not-too-far future, our hardworking Soldiers will be on their way home.

As reassuring as this thought may be, however, it is also one that we should entertain with caution. Just as the athlete must focus his or her aim beyond the finish line, we must focus our aim at a point beyond the homecoming. In other words, now is not the time to start relaxing and thinking about what you can put off until after your spouse returns.

Rather, now is the time to buckle down for the long haul. Now is the time to reach for that second wind, to take a good look at what you have accomplished thus far and to think about how you're going to continue this race.

As the end of a deployment nears, there is a tendency to "ready the nest," which means that family members left at home start to prepare the household for the service member's return. In a positive sense, this means organizing, cleaning, and tying up loose ends. However, the flip side of this phenomenon is that larger projects remain undone... they're consolidated and left to be finished later -- when you and your spouse will have "a lot more free time." The reality, however, is that no one ever has as much free time as they hope for following a deployment. The service member is often exhausted and kept busy by the post-deployment mission. The spouse often has to continue to do many of the things he/she did during the deployment, and may have to take on some new responsibilities as well.

During the final few months of a deployment, there can also be a tendency for family members to become complacent, that is, to slow to a jog during the final stretch of the race. Little ones might not be so good about picking up their toys. Mom may no longer have the energy to ensure that they do. Teenagers might slack off on their chores or bargain for extra privileges, which they may actually get because dad is just tired of trying to do the work of both parents. So, how can you keep your mind on the game as the final minutes tick down on the clock? There is no correct answer to this question. Different things will work for different people, but here are a few tips to get you started:

1. Make a mental checklist of the "how to be a good parent and/or good spouse" rules you've made for yourself over the past few months. Write them down and review them every morning, if you find yourself forgetting responsibilities or giving in when you shouldn't.

2. Stick to your routines. Remembering that you're supposed to keep doing things a certain way may help you fight off the tendency to cut corners.
3. Keep working on the big projects. The more of them you have finished by the time your spouse arrives, the less weight there will be on his/her back, and the more you will be able to enjoy your time together.
4. Set goals for yourself. Maintain a running "to do" list, or find ways to reward you and your family members for keeping on top of even the simplest of things.
5. Build blocks of "down time" or "prep time" into your schedule. Limiting the amount of time you spend on non-structured activities will help prevent them from seeping into your day-to-day life.

Finally, support one another in staying on-task. Chances are that you are not the only one losing steam. Helping your friends stick to their routines will inspire you to accomplish the same in your own household.



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