

The former competitive triathlete with the impeccable resume and infectious laugh now has her sights set on empowering women nationwide

The campfire games with a group of women at her fitness camps, she radiates positive energy. A former national and world champion triathlete, Cannon now spends her time living in Nederland relishing each day she gets to play outside. "I'm very grateful and in awe of nature everyday," she says. "I have to be outside- even if it's just to take a walk- or I just don't feel good."

Cannon continues to remain true to herself, always finding fun in everything she does. Even during her hardcore raining days, she believed in positive affirmations and ended every day with what she did well, never finishing on a negative note.

"I had a log book and in it I'd write what I saw that was beautiful, inspirational quotes or even if I tied my shoes well that day," she says. Although she no longer competes, Cannon continues her practice of writing blessings on the soles of her shoes. "They're sort of like angel pads, so every time I run, the Earth feels that blessing."

Today her training partners include her two horses. That's right, when Cannon's finished lacing up her running shoes, she heads straight for the stable to get her four-legged friends.

"Running with horses is just so magical," she explains. "I teach them that I'm the lead mare so they'll run with me. I don't even need a leash or halter." Cannon started training with her horses on the trails around her home about 10 years ago.

"I knew I needed to spend time training the horses and riding them. But then I figured why don't I just run next to them so I can get a workout, too? Besides if I come to a really hard hill, I can just climb on."

Cannon admits even though she may occasionally hitch a ride, the horses struggle to keep up with her on the downhills. "My horses are great training partners since they never get tired," she laughs.

The Road Less Taken

Cannon competed in her first triathlon in 1980 when she was just 20 years old. A college student at Auburn University, she agreed to accompany her boyfriend to an event in Oxford, Maryland, to cheer him on, never planning on actually doing the race herself. The night before the event, she helped the race director fill race packets. As a thank you, the director offered to let her race for free - an offer Cannon couldn't refuse, since the race fee was a whopping 50 dollars, big bucks for a college student.

"The only thing I had done that was even close to a triathlon was a walkathon in Huntsville," remembers Cannon. "And when I told the race director that I hadn't raised any money- remembering that in the walkathon I collected pledges for pennies per mile- he looked at me like I was from another planet and just said, "No problem, you can do the race."

The triathlon consisted of a 2.4-mile open-water swim, which was a cinch for Cannon thanks to her background in the sport (she was attending Auburn on a swimming scholarship). Next came a 20-mile run. "That was a little more challenging considering I was a halfmiler," laughs Cannon. "I just kept thinking, "Now how many times around the track is that?"

The final leg of the race was a 50-mile bike ride, which would be the longest distance Cannon would have put on her bike at one time. The most she'd logged on her anything-hut-a-racing-bike (complete with baskets on the back and streamers on the handlebars) was about two-and-a-half miles on her commute to classes.

"I had no idea how long the bike leg would take," she says. "Fifty miles was a long way to drive in a car I thought." With her bike baskets filled with peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, an entire box of Hostess oatmeal cakes and a six-pack of Coke, Cannon showed up ready to race. And oh

Being Colleen





yeah, she bungeed a pillow on the frame just in case she needed a nap.

After the swim, Cannon was in first place, but instead of hitting the road to run, she stood on shore and cheered other racers. When she decided it was time to continue, she teamed up with a group of four guys and talked to them the entire leg making time fly by. And then it was time for the bike ride. After the first five miles, Cannon saw an aid station and figured she'd better pack more free food on her bike, since who knew when she'd cross the finish line?

"By the third or fourth one, I noticed a cot and thought this must be where you stay all night" she recalls with a grin. "So I got off my bike, grabbed my pillow and started to lay down. People came up to see if I had a medical emergency and I said, 'I just want to sleep here.'" "You can't sleep here," they said. So I asked them, "What's the rush?" "When they told her she was in the lead for women, she thought she'd continue along. "By mile 35, I had eaten so much I was delirious. I felt like the Good Year blimp, since I hadn't passed up the cookies at any of the aid stations."

Cannon finished the race in second place and immediately headed for the beer tent to celebrate. When a representative from Specialized approached her about sponsorship, she replied, "You guys are insane? I'm never doing this again!" Fortunately for the world of triathlon, Cannon changed her mind.

A Shining Star

Cannon quickly became a force to be reckoned on the professional triathlon circuit. She was the 1984 world champion and two-time national champion in 1988 and 1990. In 1989 she was crowned the Coca-Cola Grand Prix of Triathlon Champion, making her the top points-getter for the year in her sport. In the mid-80s, Cannon began a 10-year relationship with Hind and helped revolutionize the design of women's sports apparel.

Making a name for herself was nothing new for this Terra Haute, Indiana, native. Cannon, the second to youngest of eight children, quickly learned to hone in on her competitive spirit.

"I had to be competitive to even eat and get attention," jokes Cannon. She grew up swimming and riding horses and attributes her athleticism to her active parents. When it was time for Cannon to attend high school, her family relocated to Scottsboro, Alabama, where the only sport available for girls was baton twirling. Taking matters into her own hands, Cannon decided to start her own basketball team.

"There were about three or four of us who knew how to play, so we started practicing on our own and got the team going. Then we got the tallest girl in school to be our center" she remembers. "We teach the other girls the rules and dribble." By senior year, her team made it to the state's final four competition

Colleen's Quest

When Cannon stopped racing she decided to embark upon a new adventure and created Women's Quest Fitness Retreats. "I learned so much being a woman athlete and wanted to pass it on," says Cannon. Women's Quest camps give women across the country the chance to come to Winter Park, as well as Boulder and Tuscany, Italy, for several days and experience the outdoors. Cannon has even rounded up an expert staff consisting of some of the top female triathletes, swimmers, runners and cyclists in the world. "We want women to feel good about themselves and we empower them to feel good physically," she explains.

What these women end up taking away with them, however, is much more than sore muscles, bumps and bruises. Cannon uses these physical activities to help women find out more about themselves and to give them the confidence to conquer just about anything.

"Beyond providing expert instruction on traditional sports like swimming, trail running and mountain biking, we also teach women how to tap into their own source of strength and inspiration," says Cannon. "Questers learn how to become their own lifetime coach and motivator through the challenges of adventure and introspection."

As for Colleen's quest, she hopes to forge ahead in her pursuit to find balance in her life, both physically and spiritually- and, as always to have fun.

"I want to continue to rekindle the kid inside, and of course, to make Women's Quest even bigger. It must be what I'm here to do because it comes so naturally for me."

For more information about Women's Quest Fitness Retreats, contact Colleen Cannon at 303-545-9295 or log onto www.womensquest.com.

Kelli Rosen is a Lafayette-based freelance writer who attended a Women's Quest camp last summer