

serious fun

A competitive athlete loses the race-and finds herself in the process.

By Sarah Bowen Shea

The brochure for the Women's Quest Fitness Camp told prospective campers to come to Colorado "ready to play"— and to leave their competitive natures at home.

Sure, I could do that — about as easily as I could leave my brain back at my apartment. As a hardcore rower and occasional triathlete, my competitive nature was omnipresent, forever telling me to pull harder, swim faster and pass that cyclist ahead of me. So I was intrigued by the six-day multisport camp run by former professional triathlete Colleen Cannon. Maybe I'd finally found someone who could show me how to dismantle my relentless competitive spirit so I could occasionally sit back and just enjoy the ride.

Started in 1992, Women's Quest focuses on swimming, mountain hiking, running, hiking and yoga. Yet Cannon takes it beyond the physical, striving, to help each camper find her inner strength. Actually, I secretly suspected that Cannon wouldn't stick to this "play" theme. As a pro triathlete in the mid to late '80s, she routinely beat the likes of Paula Newby-Fraser, eight-time winner of the Ironman. But when our group of 25 women convened at the Woodspur Lodge in Winter Park, and Cannon introduced the camp staffers as her "playmates," I began to realize she was serious about play.

Initially concerned that my fellow campers would be rock-hard endurance machines who could grind me into the ground, I was relieved to discover that they ran the gamut from a 22-year-old novice triathlete to a 62-year-old hiker. Several of the women in their 30s and early 40s had run a few marathons or wanted to try a triathlon, although a few were still pushing themselves off the proverbial couch. In other words, they'd be healthy competition, but not too over-whelming. As we took off on an hour-long ride to get a lay of the surrounding land, I reminded myself to take in the beauty of the ponderosa pines and clusters of purple lupine rather than dwell on powering to the front of our pack.

After our ride and a tasty dinner of chicken or tofu fajitas, spinach salad and cheesecake, we were introduced to the more serious side of camp — a guided meditation. Cannon led us to a room where moonlight streamed through the windows and music tinkled in the background. We lay on the floor and closed our eyes as she

led us on an imaginary journey across the oceans and up the mountains of our minds, encouraging us to experience it with all of our senses and to stay in the moment.

In this solitary landscape, I didn't have to suppress my impulses to be the first or the fastest.



Climbing every mountain

The next morning after a breakfast of buckwheat pancakes heaped with fruit, and real coffee. Cannon divided us into two groups to put our minds and bodies into real action. During swimming drills with Anna Pettis Scott, a former member of the U.S. national swim team, I squelched my need to stand out as one of the faster swimmers at camp, while the 8,500 foot altitude kept my typical frenetic pace in check during an afternoon trail run. And because it seemed that the only way to really “win” at yoga was to relax and let go of anything remotely associated with ego, I did just that during the evening class.

Peak Experience

Despite my first day's success at chilling, the next day I awoke with my competitive instincts intact and roaring to go. After breakfast, we took a mountain bike ride on a relatively flat trail, skirting tree trunks and navigating muddy bogs. I actually laughed at being in the middle of the pack — until we

approached a two-mile hill. Then, as if someone had flicked a switch inside me, I put mettle to the pedal and ground my way toward the top, lungs heaving and quads burning in my quest to be the first to reach the summit.

I soon passed the young triathlete-in-training but knew that a few women were still ahead of me. After 17 minutes (my cutthroat nature makes me a chronic watch-checker) I finally reached the summit, dripping with sweat and gasping for air. Unaware of our “race” to the top,

the two campers who had beat me to the peak congratulated me. As we rehashed the misery of the ascent and shared the exhilaration, I admired their modesty; apparently they already possessed a healthy dose of Cannon's playful attitude. Later that afternoon, we assembled for what sounded like a Colleen-gone-goofy idea: partnered foot “massages” done with aromatherapy oils and warm, colored water. I paired up with Joann, a mother of two whose husband had given her the trip instead of a treadmill for her birthday. While one of us soaked our feet in lavender-scented purple water, the other improvised foot-soothing rubbing and kneading. After initial giggles, we took turns enjoying the float-away experience. I marveled at the fact that I was actually . . . relaxing. With each passing day, my playmates seemed increasingly more willing to push themselves physically, unfettered by doubts or fears. I, on the other hand, seemed to be going in the opposite

direction. With each successive ride, run and swim session, I felt more secure with just being myself instead of striving to be the Superwoman of the group.

The last hurrah

On the final day, Cannon announced a trail-running race with two options: running once or twice around a 10k loop that wound through meadows and forests and ended with a killer hill. The old Sarah would have automatically opted for the longer route—after all, longer was better, right?

This time, I decided to see how I felt after completing the loop once before deciding whether to do it again. As I ran, my mind flipped back and forth between options. . . . During the long, flat stretch, I reveled in the scenery. My lungs and legs felt strong enough to run forever.

But when I came to the hill, my heart began to pound. What had started as an effortless cruise became a grunt for the finish line. Trees swept by in a blur; I was running blind. Rather than reveling in the moment, I prayed for it to end. Suddenly I realized the best thing I could do for myself was to stop after one loop. As I waited for the others to finish the 10k or 20k distance, I felt proud of them — and myself. It was the farthest some of them had ever run. I had come a long way, too, by choosing the shorter option. It felt so good not to feel threatened anymore, and to realize that I didn't have to come in first to be a winner.

Sarah Bowen Shea is a free-lance writer and editor in San Francisco.

Cost for Women's Quest six-day camp is \$925 and includes meals and snacks, lodging and all instruction. Mountain bike rental, massages and airport shuttle are extra. This summer, camp will be held June 17-22 in Winter Park, Colo. For information, contact Colleen Cannon, 2525 Arapahoe Ave., Ste. E4-181, Boulder, CO 80302, (303) 443-5930.

