

Summer Camp Series: Phil Latter gets amped for running camp

Three camps. Three charismatic coaches. One intrepid reporter and his sleeping bag.

By Phil Latter



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Rocky Mountain XC Camp is just one of three distance camps Phil Latter will visit this summer

Photo By: courtesy of Team Prep USA

06/29/10 - [SUMMER CAMPS ON THE CALENDAR](#)

“If you build it, they will come.”

All right, I know that’s a misquote from the famous baseball movie Field of Dreams (it’s actually, “...he will come”), but when it comes to running camps this seems as true a maxim as they come. Google anything on running camps and prepare to become inundated with every conceivable approach to running out there.

Want to run with Kenyans? There’s a camp for that.

Want a chance to hang out with only the girls? There’s a camp for that.

Want to train with Olympians, climb rugged mountains, receive Nike gear, or be led in a spiritual quest on the trails? Yep, there are camps for that, too.

For all the money that a potential camper pays (and make no mistake, there are no freebies out there), what do they actually get for their time spent away from home? Is it worth leaving family and friends because of a well put together website or catchy brochure? And what really goes on at these camps?

Starting in early July, I’ll do my best to answer those questions and many more by taking part in three camps on opposite sides of the country. At each camp I’ll take on a different role: participant, coach, counselor. I’ll get the chance to hang out with Foot Locker and Nike Cross National finalists, sleep in the dorms, run in astonishingly gorgeous places and burn a lot of stuff.

Yes, burn. Bonfires, it seems, are a recurring theme at all three camps.

Pyromania notwithstanding, here's a preview of the three camps I'll be attending this summer.

Rocky Mountain Cross Country Camp – Gunnison and Crested Butte, CO
Camp Director – Trent Sanderson – Elevation: 7,700 to 10,500 feet above sea level
Author's Role: Participant

There are few places in the world more beautiful than Crested Butte in the summer. Known as the wildflower capital of Colorado, the mid-summer blooms stand out against the rugged, snow covered mountains to create a panorama that has graced the cover of Runner's World, Adventure, and Outside magazine on more than one occasion.

It is home to wealthy retirees, young adventurers, and those seeking a communion with the harsh realities and serene beauty of nature. It is an elite skier Mecca by winter, a mountain biker haven by summer.



Photo courtesy Team Prep USA

And, for six weeks in June, July, and August, it is the open canvas on which Coach Trent Sanderson paints his latest training masterpiece.

“Our niche is helping those who want more.”

It's mid-May and the fickle Colorado weather is threatening snow after my five hour drive to Team Prep USA's headquarters in Crested Butte. Lucky for me, everything is nice and toasty in Sanderson's glass-framed office. Team Prep USA is Sanderson's organization designed to take high school athletes to the next level through personal coaching. We've spent the last hour discussing everything from the state of American distance running to hiking up Mount Elbert with a billionaire. Now we're looking at the framed articles and pictures that adorn the Team Prep USA office walls.

It's an impressive mural of past campers, current clients, and the notable company Sanderson keeps in his journeys across the country and world. Here's a picture of Trent with bronze medalist Deena Kastor; over there

are shots of All-Americans Dana Boyle, Emma Coburn, and Joe Bosshard. Pictures of the French Alps and Appalachian Trail sit in close proximity to those of current Crested Butte High School runner Erin Kelly. Hello, Shelby Hayes. Hello, Samantha George. The wall is here as both a testament to the program's success and a source of daily inspiration.

"But it's so much bigger than just running," Sanderson says, sitting back behind his desk. "I've had some tough times. I was not a strong student." He tells me about overcoming dyslexia, about self-coaching his way through college at the University of New Orleans to a 4:06 mile. "We're all driven by different things, but because I struggled, it made me more fiery and made me want to prove more things to people."

Being coached by a private coach and attending six-week running camps isn't cheap. Sanderson knows most of his athletes come from well-to-do families. And yet, when looking over his roster of clients and campers, this resilient nature, even more so than talent, is what he singles out as a key attribute.

"If you've had everything handed to, and you're living these incredible lives, you need to find a way to still want that," he says, the "that" being everything from running greatness to getting into a good college. "Because if you're handed it, then you're just spoiled and you won't appreciate it."

This appreciation extends from Sanderson to his athletes. A scientific approach to training is balanced by a passion for the sport.

"I look at it as what makes me unique is that I'm teaching these kids to be successful at life," he says. "I think my workouts are great, but I think there are a lot of plans to get to the top. I think what makes mine different is I buy my kids into it, and they really feel like it'll work no matter what."

"I don't think I've met anybody as energetic and enthusiastic about running as Trent," says Paul Spangler, the head cross country coach at the Virginia Military Institute, and former colleague of Sanderson's at Florida State. "He's very into [helping his athletes] and very supportive."

Adds Sanderson's current assistant, former Massachusetts runner Loren Donohue: "Trent is very motivational. He's good at keeping it exciting for everybody [including the staff]."

Perhaps the highest praise comes from in-town runner Erin Kelly, a cross country state champion. "He definitely changed my life."

When camp officially opens June 27, Sanderson will have 100 high schoolers signed up, with an average of 74 campers at any given time. Twenty-five client campers will also get the chance to stay into August for an extended camp based out of Crested Butte (the main camp is staged at Western State University in Gunnison, just down the road from Crested Butte).

"Them coming out here, learning a work ethic, learning to work together, [it] is probably far better than any summer job. That's what allows me to sleep at night."

It's certainly more beautiful. Campers here are able to train on relatively flat, almost traffic-free dirt roads that go deep into pristine wilderness. At an altitude of 9000 feet, and with the wildflowers in full bloom, it's hard to imagine a more ideal place to train for a summer.

When all is said and done, it's the natural beauty combined with Sanderson's excitement and passion that'll keep the kids coming back to Gunnison and Crested Butte for years to come.

What's his dream for each camp then?

"I ask [the campers] if when they're sitting down, watching the Olympics, and they see some inspirational story about an Olympian, if they ever get goosebumps going up their necks, and they just go on an 8-mile run and feel

they can take on the world. They say, 'Yeah, we've had that.'

"Well," Sanderson says after a moment, the passion and fire already burning high, "I feel we can create that every day."