

September 2017 *Wingfoot* Spotlight: Running Camps: They're Not Just for Kids

By Jay Holder

The phone has been ringing a lot in Ryan Warrenburg's office. Nestled away in the North Carolina mountain town of Blowing Rock, Warrenburg and his employer ZAP Fitness were thrust into the national spotlight in July when the New York Times published a first-person account of one of the adult running camps he coordinates.

"Since the article came out, we've had a number of runners call and ask us about dates for next year," Warrenburg says. "Unfortunately, we haven't set them yet, so I've been taking down their names and adding them to our mailing list."

Thanks in part to the high profile write-up in the "newspaper of record," adult running camps have gone mainstream. But adult running camps are not new. ZAP has been hosting the camps for nearly 15 years. Warrenburg, a former professional runner with ZAP's elite team, says interest has climbed steadily over the past decade. With just two dozen slots at each of their five summer camps, ZAP always expects to sell out.

Meet the Campers

Atlanta runner Robb Coltrin, 49, is an early believer. Coltrin attended ZAP eight years ago in hopes of rediscovering his love of the sport. "I hit this spot where I was very complacent," Coltrin says. "I asked myself 'why are you OK being middle of the road?'" Upon entering the camp, Coltrin says he weighed 200 pounds and was running five or six miles a couple of times a week. "I thought maybe I'll give it a shot at trying to crank it up a little bit."

Coltrin describes his fellow campers at ZAP as an eclectic group, remembering an 80-year-old man trying to run his first marathon and a local attorney he still keeps in touch with nearly a decade later. What he doesn't recall is the wiry 135-pound runner looking to qualify for the Olympics. "They were typically people I'd say would consider themselves runners and may have at one time considered themselves good runners and they were trying to get back to that."

Coltrin was one of those guys who used to consider himself a "good runner." He entered the camp with a marathon personal best of 3:24, a time he didn't think he could touch in his current state. He told his counselors he was aiming to run a 3:40 marathon. They misheard him and recorded that he wanted to run 3:14. When he tried to correct them, they wouldn't have it. "The most I got out of it was the goal setting part," Coltrin says. "Set stretch goals. Tell people what you are trying to do. Tell everyone in the world." It was not what he was expecting to walk away with. "It was a lot more academic and a lot less 'you're running wrong'," Coltrin says.



Carolina Margarella, 34, describes herself as "a life-long passionate runner-athlete." She attended an all-women's camp ZAP hosted in June of this year. "I'm competitive with myself, but at the end of the day I run to be happy and healthy." Margarella says she signed up for the camp to meet new runners and get expert advice from professional athletes. "It brings back the passion and camaraderie to running," she says. "It's a testament that it brought all those people together. They're not all chasing their BQs. They just wanted to learn more and of course, improve."

Complete Running Tools

A month after camp, Margarella finished a Half Ironman in 5:40:16. Next up: the Berlin Marathon in September. And while success wasn't that immediate for Coltrin, he has since lost 30 pounds and run 3:20 to qualify for the Boston

Marathon in 2016. He attributes it to the lessons he learned at ZAP. He's currently training for the Sky to Summit 50K in November.

"You're not going to be a drastically better runner at the end of four days or a week," says Warrenburg. "But there are things you can take away." At ZAP, campers attend lectures on nutrition, building a training plan, strength training and injury prevention by guest experts like four-time Boston and New York City Marathon Champion Bill Rodgers.

Rodgers, who along with 1972 Olympic Gold medalist Frank Shorter, is often credited with America's first running boom, understands the growing interest behind the camps. "The older you get, the more you look at your health," says Rodgers, 69. "That's why the Olympic sports like running are the sports that are growing."



In Flagstaff, AZ, professional runners Ben and Stephanie Bruce host Running with the Bruces every August. The couple agrees that the benefits of a week-long running camp are the tools and knowledge you take home. "A lot of people think it's easy for pro runners. It doesn't come easy. We work really hard," says Stephanie Bruce, who made national headlines when she qualified for the 2016 U.S. Olympic Track and Field Trials six months after giving birth. The Bruces say this approach gives perspective to runners who try to balance training with careers. "This is our full time job," says Ben, a winner of five

Rock 'n' Roll Marathons. "It's different when you have time to come home after your workout and make a really nice meal, or take a nap. So, we tell campers it's about making due with what you have."

"Complete running tools are what we are all about," says Jeff Galloway. The winner of the first AJC Peachtree Road Race and 1972 Olympian has been hosting adult running camps since 1975. "We set up an injury-free program so campers can run until they are 100." While Galloway says he doesn't have statistics on how many of his campers have lived to 100, he says his injury rate is "almost zero."

Lifelong Relationships

At Running with the Bruces, campers are out the door by 6 a.m. and headed to one of the many scenic running routes in Flagstaff. After their run, campers immediately refuel and do dynamic stretching before heading back to the host hotel. The rest of the day is filled with talks on fundamentals, drill sessions, a team lunch (Ben goes to the store and buys sandwiches and chips), a chance to explore downtown Flagstaff and a goal-setting session around the campfire to end the evening.

"It's very homey," says Stephanie. "It's like everyone is our friend."

"You kind of learn from each other as well as from Steph and Ben," says Elisa Becze, 38, a runner from Pittsburgh. Becze was one of the Bruce's first eleven campers the first time they hosted the camp. Now, it's more than doubled in size. Becze, a medical journal editor who "caught the running bug five years ago" has traveled the country meeting up with fellow campers for races and runs.

Warrenburg, the Bruces and Galloway all take pride in the lifelong relationships that form after the camps have cleared. “The whole team thing is huge. I always ran on a team,” says Rodgers who competed for Wesleyan University and the Greater Boston Track Club. “I meet a lot of people who never got chosen to be on a sports team,” he says. “They come to this sport and the door is open.”

“You get people who come and end up with friends from around the country,” says Warrenburg. ZAP hosts alumni Facebook groups for all its campers. Galloway says he maintains relationships with his campers, offering them personal coaching free of charge after camp ends. He says he gets about 100 emails a day.

Is it really a vacation?

It’s not breakfast in bed or cocktails on the beach. But camp organizers point out the kind of people who choose to vacation at a running camp aren’t interested in a relaxing experience. “It’s an active vacation,” says Warrenburg. “For most people who aren’t pro runners, running is their escape. It’s their time to do what they want to do. It’s a time to be around other runners and not people who think you are an oddball for running at lunch or getting up at 4:30 a.m. to run,” he says. “To be able to go somewhere and be surrounded by people who enjoy the same thing as you do, there’s a special energy to that.”

And it’s an opportunity to see some of the most picturesque places in the country. Blowing Rock, NC, where ZAP is located, attracts tourist regardless of its running trails. The “Crown of the Blue Ridge” is a popular spot for Blue Ridge Mountain getaways.

“The setting was part of the incentive,” says Becze. “Flagstaff is amazing!” The small city of 70,000 is a running mecca thanks to its 7,000 foot elevation. Some runs climb to 9,000 feet above sea level.

Galloway hosts five retreats in Carmel, CA, two in Lake Tahoe, CA and one in Blue Mountain Beach, FL. “They not only get the running experience and knowledge,” says Galloway, “They also get some fabulous runs.”

All camp organizers point out that while the schedules are often jam-packed, all campers are free to sit out a session.

Rate of Return

If you attend a camp, there is a good chance you’ll meet someone who has been there before. Warrenburg estimates 40-45% of ZAP campers have attended a camp in the past. Galloway puts his number at somewhere between 60-70%.



Margarella, who just attended her first camp says she will be back. Nearly a decade has passed since Coltrin last attended. Would he return? “I think about it all the time. I would do it in a heartbeat.”

Want to attend one of the running camps in this article?

Camp	Date(s)	Location	Cost	Website
ZAP Fitness Adult Running Camps	Seven camps between June – September each year	Blowing Rock, NC	\$750-\$1,050	Zapfitness.com
Running with the Bruces	August	Flagstaff, AZ	\$1,095-\$1,595	stephandbenbruce.com
Jeff Galloway Running Retreats		Carmel, CA Lake Tahoe, CA Blue Mountain Beach, FL	\$364 & Up	Jeffgalloway.com