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Women's Outdoor Adventure, Travel, Sports, and Lifestyle

Need a pick-me-up?
Colleen Cannon's a pro
at lifting spirits.

PHOTO: ANNE W. KLAUSE

Colleen running in Canyonlands, Utah

THE GODDESS OF

BY NANCY COULTER-PARKER

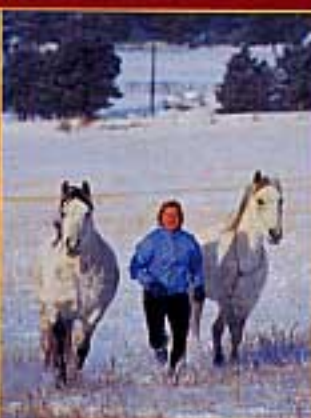
PLAY

WHEN READING THE BROCHURE FOR FORMER PRO-ATHLETE COLLEEN CANNON'S Women's Quest summer camps, it would be easy to be intimidated. The camp's staff bios are chock-full of former national athletes, such as swim team member Anna Pettis-Scott and Olympic bronze medalist and three-time world champion marathon runner Lorraine Muller, to name just two. Given this you wouldn't be the first person to think to yourself, "These camps are for hardcore athletes—they're not for me." But such decisions are made in haste, as seven-time repeat camper and mother of two Kim Beck learned.

"Everyone wonders if she'll be good enough to go to this camp that has all of these world-class athletes as trainers," says Kim, "but Colleen makes you feel that you're going to do great no matter where your abilities lie. She has an ability to put people at ease, and," she adds, "she has that contagious laugh."

And that's pretty much how it goes for everyone who meets Colleen. Whether you've known the 5-foot-5-inch blonde, ponytail-wearing 43-year-old for 25 years or just one week, you'll learn that this former world champion triathlete is the Goddess of Play or, as she is known to say, has "a Ph.D. in play," but not from a traditional institution.

"Colleen is a very unique person," says Olympian Lorraine Muller, a longtime friend and training partner. "She has the exuberance of a child, which is rare to find in adults. She's very savvy and has a lot of experience and is a wonderful teacher to a lot of people. But if you're taking life too seriously, Colleen is a good antidote."



Left to right: The staff of Women's Quest, from left Colleen Cannon, Jacqueline Stanford, Lily, Diano Israel, Rebecca Folsom and Candace Newlove; Colleen running with Rafiki and Demi in the Magnolia Mountains; Colleen at women's quest camp in 1997

A SOUTHERN GIRL

Having entrenched herself for more than two decades in the large community of athletes who live in and around Boulder, Colorado, it is hard to imagine Colleen calling anywhere else home. Living 17 miles outside of Boulder, in Nederland, at 8,230 feet altitude, Colleen revels in trail running and horseback riding and all that her Rocky Mountain environment has to offer. Yet this mountain mama hailed from the Midwest and the South—Indiana and Alabama to be exact.

She spent middle school in Indiana, where she was part of the Girls Athletic Association (GAA). "I don't know if all the girls did it, but it seemed like Indiana was pretty hip on giving girls opportunities," she explains. Colleen played tennis, basketball, and volleyball; ran track and swam. She excelled quickly and joined many varsity teams. Then she moved to Alabama, where she was told, "we have baton twirling."

Although Colleen did become a cheerleader to try to fit in, she wasn't swayed by the lack of athletic opportunities available to girls her age. Instead, true to the enthusiastic self she embodies today, she was able to spark an interest in sports in the girls in her area, which in turn led to the creation of a number of athletic teams for girls. "We were complete novices, but we had a fun time and tried hard," she says. "I was a little fish in a big pond in Indiana, and then I became a big fish in a small pond. I knew how to do these sports, and I just thought everyone did."

And if there's one lesson that Alabama taught Colleen, it was determination. "In the South they call you names. It was a bit of a shock, but it gave me a lot of determination to stand up for what I value and say, 'I don't care what you call me.'" But Colleen is not intent on South-bashing; on the contrary, she admits that "It gave me determination I probably wouldn't have if I hadn't gone to school there. It gave me a strong will. It forced my fire to roar because I couldn't do as much as I wanted to."

THE ACCIDENTAL TRIATHLETE

Colleen took her enthusiasm for athletics to Auburn University, where she swam during her freshman year and ran track and cross-country for all four years. During this time two seeds were sown. First, she tried her first triathlon. Her boyfriend was going to do it, so she casually decided to join him for an "adventure." Not quite sure what she was getting herself into, but assuming that the 2.4-mile swim, 20-mile run, and 50-mile bike ride would take a while to complete, she loaded her bike basket full of Hostess cupcakes, peanut-butter-and-jelly sandwiches, and Coke. With nary a cupcake to spare, Colleen placed second in the women's category and caught the triathlon bug. She began to race more during her last year of college and always placed well.

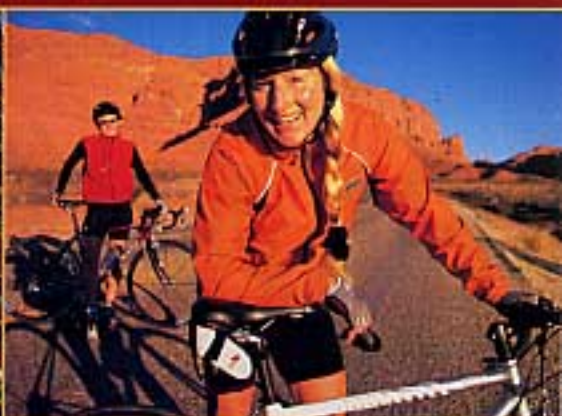
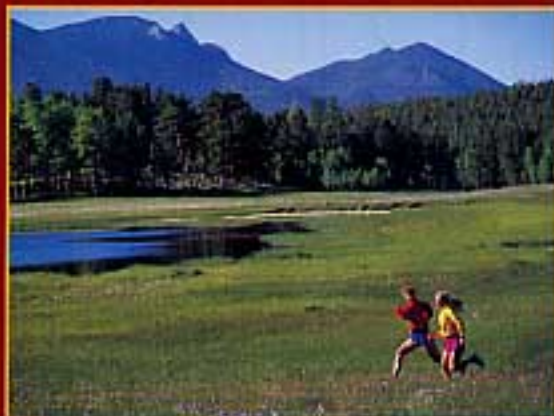
The second seed was planted when she realized that there was such a thing as professional athletes. This epiphany came from working at summer running camps in Brevard, North Carolina. "I would go every summer for a couple of weeks, and I was on staff with my coach, and he brought in a lot of professional runners. They would talk about their stories, and I would

be like, 'So all you do is get up and run and eat and run and that's what you do?' I was in this sheltered world, and there was a seed planted at that point; I thought, 'I could do that.' And then I thought, 'I could do that with triathlon.'"

Triathlon, thought Colleen, was her vehicle out of Alabama. It also became the best education she ever had.

After graduating from Auburn, Colleen moved to Colorado to train with fellow triathlete and current Women's Quest staffer Diane Israel. Because the sport was relatively new, the duo relied on each other for training tips; no women had gone before them to tell them what to eat or how to train. Colleen began winning races and signed up for Ironman Hawaii in 1983. She went that summer thinking she might win the event, and instead an

She loaded her bike basket full of Hostess cupcakes, peanut-butter-and-jelly sandwiches, and Coke.



Left to right: Colleen (yellow) and Danielle Laramie in Nederland, Colorado; A group of Women's Quest participants; Colleen and Rebecca Heaton in St. George Utah.

overzealous training regimen led her to a fourteenth-place finish. The setback almost ended her career.

She thought to herself, "Why am I killing myself?" And with that she decided she didn't like triathlon after all. She stayed in Hawaii, stopped racing and working out, and took a job on a sailboat.

Then, in the spring, a friend called and convinced her to move to California and give triathlon one more chance. There she worked as a lifeguard and trained. In 1984, she won the world championship. She trained in California for three years before moving back to Colorado in 1986. And her career as a triathlete spawned a long list of accolades until she retired in 1992.

"It was funny because I was getting faster and faster each year, but I was getting mentally tired. You can't really do anything else when you're racing; you have to stay focused all year long." She adds, "I wanted to do more than one thing in my life." She started doing editors' retreats for the running apparel company Hind, for whom she also worked. Without having done one, she told the editors about her intent to create a camp called Women's Quest. Before she knew it, they were writing about it. Pushed into action, she hired all of her friends and great triathletes to help her turn her dream into reality, and she's never looked back.

WOMEN'S QUEST

Colleen was talking about mind, body, and spirit—along with chi, mana, prana, life force, and energy—long before any of the retreats you see springing up as of late. In fact, says Colleen, "Women's Quest was the first retreat, where we actually took the physical, technical side of sport with very high-end athletes and melded it with yoga, meditation, art, music and dance." For the mind component, Colleen likes to ask her campers to examine a question posed by Pulitzer Prize-winning poet Mary Oliver: What do you plan to do with your one wild

and precious life? For this part of camp, she asks each participant to dig in and figure out her true heart's desire, to identify goals she wants to accomplish in life.

Although all of this may seem like a departure from competing, Colleen feels like she's come full circle. "Women's Quest was a way for me to give back all that I learned. I really felt that racing and training and being fit wasn't all about working out and beating yourself up; it was about the connection to yourself and to other people."

With Women's Quest now in its twelfth year of operation, Colleen will host 10 camps with up to 30 participants per camp this summer. And Davis, California resident Kim Beck can't wait for her eighth camp to start. "Aside from marrying the man I married and having kids, it's the best thing I've ever done. There are few things in your life that you can say, 'This made a difference,'" says Kim. "I was talking to another gal who has gone to more camps than I have. We both shared that we had nightmares before going to camp that Colleen wasn't there. She really is the magnet to the whole thing."

When faced with such compliments, Colleen smiles, thrilled to know that another soul has been sparked. But she's reluctant to take the praise. She credits nature and the zeal that being active ignites. "I love to see people get hooked and wake up. You can see the glow come back to their skin and eyes and see them make the connection to Mother Nature and to themselves. I think that women are the key. If you can enliven women and empower them to tap into their own energy, then children, husbands, and the earth are happier. We are the hub. I used to try to save the whale, the dolphin . . . but then I realized I should do what I do best—help women."

Considering that she has been reaching out to women since high school, perhaps this self-proclaimed "free spirit who loves life" should add another accolade to her list: Doctor of Inspiration. And, thankfully, Colleen has found no reason to curb her enthusiasm. ☀

**What do you
plan to do
with your one
wild and
precious life?**