

REA AND ZAP FITNESS PROGRAM ON AN OLYMPIC MISSION

By DON SIKORSKI
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Palo Alto, California is a long plane ride, and maybe a bit of a culture shock, from Blowing Rock, North Carolina. But that's exactly the route Pete Rea and members of his ZAP Fitness team were traveling, returning home from the Cardinal Invitational Track and Field Meet to the familiar fresh air, trout ponds, and groomed trails of their Elite Athlete Training Center that sits squarely in the North Carolina woods. Rea, a former Farmington High School and University of Connecticut distance running standout, is the Head Coach of the ZAP Fitness Elite Athlete Program, a non-profit training center designed for distance runners with Olympic aspirations. Along with programs like Team USA Minnesota and the Hanson-Brooks Distance Project, ZAP Fitness is a big reason for the distance running comeback in the United States, providing opportunities for post-collegiate athletes looking to reach the next level.

Although his running is casual these days, Rea, 39, would have been a perfect prototype for the ZAP program himself had it been in place years ago. Rea has outstanding success under Coach Dennis Person at Farmington High School, earning State Class "M" Championships in both Cross-Country and Track his senior year. Rea finished 8th overall as a junior and 6th as a senior at the State Open in Cross-Country, and his 9:12.79 Two Mile clocking in the 1987 Indoor Track State Open was a Connecticut record that stood for nearly 20 years (Guilford's Jay Koloseus ran 9:11.34 in 2006 to finally erase Rea's mark). He attributes his strong start in the sport to Coach Person. "He instilled a fire in me; the love of running," recalled Rea. "Practice (at Farmington) was tough, but we loved it".

Rea would later go on to compete at the University of Connecticut for Coach Greg Roy, contributing to a strong team that would finish 10th in the nation in the 1990. Coach Roy also had a hand in Rea's future coaching aspirations. "He (Coach Roy) led me to pursue coaching," said Rea. "He really had the ability to know what makes athletes tick psychologically". Rea would also finish 11th overall in the prestigious Manchester Road Race that November (22:28 for 4.75 miles) and would graduate from UConn looking for an opportunity to continue training and racing at an elite level. Yet there were few opportunities for runners at his level to do so. The Nike South Training Program in Atlanta showed some interest in Rea's credentials, so he packed his bags and relocated for nothing more than free shoes and a small racing travel stipend. He hit the U.S. road race circuit hard, competing in events everywhere from New England to Los Angeles. Rea continued to get stronger and improve, posting personal bests of 23:30 for 8K, 1:04:50 for the half marathon, and 2:24:36 in the marathon. Although Rea was clearly an elite U.S. runner looking for an opportunity, little did he know that the opportunity would develop not as an athlete but as a coach. It was his work at the Craftsbury Running Camp in Vermont where he would meet Andy Palmer. "He (Andy) wanted to put together a training center like the European Centers in the 60's and '70's," explained Rea. "I was teaching high school in Atlanta at the time and he asked me if I would come along and be a part of it". Rea did, accompanying Palmer and his wife Zika to the small town of Blowing Rock, North Carolina. Sadly, Palmer, a two-time Olympic qualifier in the marathon with a 2:16:25 best, died of a heart attack during a training run in February 2002 at the age of 48. The ZAP Facility (an acronym for Zika and Andy Palmer) had only opened one month earlier on 68 acres in the Blue Ridge Mountains of North Carolina. The vision has been to raise the standard of distance running in the United States. Now faced with a difficult decision about the future, Zika knew in her heart that Andy's love and dedication to the sport should carry on.

Today, the ZAP Fitness Center facility, situated at 3,600 feet altitude, provides offers a terrific climate for training and offers over 50 miles of dirt trails. The 10 current resident athletes have access to a dining hall, weight room, hot tub, and state of the art exercise science laboratory. Zika and Rea have continued to carry on the vision of providing American distance runners with an opportunity to train with other athletes sharing common goals in an ideal environment. In August 2006, they would also become husband and wife, and would continue to provide the ZAP athletes with specific, individuals coaching designed at long-term development for their athletes. Zika, herself a national class runners with personal bests of 35:08 for 10K and 2:41:06 in the marathon, would also go on to complete her Master's Degree in Exercise Science and would qualify for the Olympic Trials in both 2004 and 2008. Randy Ashley, also a two-time Olympic Trials qualifier in the marathon, is also a part of the coaching staff at ZAP. The performance standards required for consideration in the ZAP program are elite by any standards. A sub 14:00 5K for Men or 16:05 for Women; under 2:20 in the marathon (2:39 for the ladies) are just some examples of where the bar is set. But athletes who do meet these criteria and are accepted as part of the program are granted room and board at the ZAP Fitness Facility, coaching services, running shoes and clothes, health insurance benefits, and a monthly stipend of \$500. All travel expenses airfare, hotels, and meals, are also covered. Days at the ZAP Facility consist of a 7:30am training session at one of the local National Parks, followed by core strengthen work as a team. After lunch and some household chores, the runners will tackle a second training session in the afternoon. Each take turns cooking meals and participates in taking care of the facility. The training atmosphere is ideal in that there are plenty of athletes to train with without the distractions that large cities environmental have.

The basic coaching principles at ZAP also make sense. Rea's philosophy is built around long-term, mileage based

development with a Lydiard approach. "If you can create a big aerobic engine, you'll be able to run at 95% of your maximum heart rate or greater by developing a more efficient aerobic capacity," explains Rea. "We do lot of volume, most of it at 75-85% of max heart rate (effort)." The philosophy is an individualized approach with a customized plan for each athlete based on target distances and ability to handle volume. John Pierce, the most recent member of the ZAP team, is one such runner benefiting from the Rea's program. A 2007 Stanford graduate and All-American from Ogdensburg, New York, Pierce has 13:56 5K and 28:54 10K credentials and is looking towards the 2008 Olympic Trails in the 3,000 meter steeplechase, where he has run 8:40. "I am excited to work with Pete," said Pierce while on his return trip from the Cardinal Invitational where he competed in the 10,000 meter run. "I've had some foot injuries after college and basically I just needed a new start. I'm glad to be with the ZAP Program". Pierce plans on hitting the road race circuit this fall and eventually take a shot at the marathon. The ZAP program offers the ideal opportunity for those target goals.

When asked what Rea would have done differently with his own running career looking back, his response was simple. "I would have listened to my coaches more," claims Rea. "I didn't rest and recover enough, and I ran too hard too often. Now I know that rest is not the absence of training but rather a part of it". As far as a career choice, Rea is confident that he made the right one. "I absolutely love what I do," said Rea of his role in the program. The success that the ZAP Fitness Program has demonstrated also proves that the formula is working. When asked about long term goals for the program, Rea was also clear in his direction. "We want to put athletes on an Olympic Team, either in 2008 or in 2012." Rea still runs every day, but his focus is now on his athletes instead of himself. "I have no desire to make a Masters comeback," laughed Rea when asked of his changes to return to the competitive ranks, although he didn't rule out a possible return to the Manchester Road Race as a competitor someday. "I ran for a lot of the wrong reasons," reflected Rea on his high school and collegiate days. "I ran and I competed because I was good at it and not because I loved it," he explained. "Frankly, I get a lot more satisfaction from helping others with their running now".

The ZAP Fitness Foundation was established to provide distance runners with the opportunity to train for the Olympic Games and World Championship competition by providing room and board, health insurance, and travel expenses to elite American distance runners. ZAP Fitness is a non-profit training facility that relies on revenues from donations, corporate sponsorships, and summer running camp programs in order to offer these amenities to it athletes. Anyone interested in donating to the ZAP Fitness program can contact Pete Rea at marathonrea@aol.com or check out the ZAP Fitness web site at www.zapfitness.com.

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