

## A Week at Athlete Fantasy Camp

Percy Knox is an efficient man. This seems appropriate for the director of athletic management at a state-of-the-art training complex that emphasizes athletic efficiency. An accomplished (formerly Olympic-level and professional) sprinter and long jumper, Percy understands movement.

We arrived with our bikes at the Athlete's Performance Institute (API) facility Monday August 30 at 6:45 AM, via free shuttle from the Country Inn & Suites hotel 1.5 miles down the road. We were ushered smoothly inside, given lockers for our gear bags, and presented with a simple but substantial breakfast menu. (Three meals a day plus snacks were provided as part of the program package.)

Let me pause respectfully and express my gratitude to the Performance Chef, Debbie Martell. A friendly, energetic and unassuming woman with black hair tied back in a stylish kitchen do, Debbie went overboard to ensure that staff and clientele were always satisfied. When I requested a whole-grain bagel with egg only the first morning, she was more than happy to comply, though the combination wasn't on the menu. Another day, I asked for extra lettuce and tomato for a turkey sandwich, and was presented with a plate of neatly-arranged fresh lettuce leaves and a perfectly-sliced, organic tomato.

Lunch included your choice of monster-sized, freshly-made sandwich or salad, with optional side dish and drink. Dinner highlights included a marinated shrimp/beef/onion/pepper kabob concoction served on a giant bed of quinoa, and a double helping of jumbo chicken and bean burritos with brown rice and cilantro on the side, among others. Debbie offered to make special dishes to order, if we so desired. Everything was well-balanced, nutritious and energy-packed. Portions were consistently sizeable, with an emphasis on protein. A couple of the female trainers suggested asking for ½-size meat portions, as typical servings were 10-12 oz. (as opposed to a standard 4 oz). I had no complaints about serving size, and haunted the kitchen and protein shake pickup counters with requests for extra snacks.

I was soon to discover that the staff at API is comprised of nothing but knowledgeable, efficient, friendly, helpful and genuinely enthusiastic people, all working in conjunction to create the most supportive and productive environment possible for athletes in training. API is a popular destination for high-level amateur and professional athletes in specializing in field sports to gymnastics to triathlon; but the facility is also open to recreational athletes looking to recover from injury, improve performance, or simply gain muscle and flexibility for long-term health.

As the week progressed, I noticed that the staff was also cross-functional: When not occupied with their own clients, athletic trainers were making shakes for clients, cleaning equipment, or assisting in group instruction.

Our particular endurance sports group was comprised of two amateur, age-group triathletes (myself and east-coast ironman Quentin Chu), Bruce, a recreational cyclist, Mike, a swim coach and triathlete observing for two days of the week, and Jim Woodman from Active.com, also there as an observer.

Day One of the one-week endurance sports program involved walking and running gait analysis, run VO2 max test, nutrition seminar, and introductions to the Core Performance philosophy, with participatory demonstrations of the Movement Prep and Recovery/Regeneration phases. Lucky me, I was first on the VO2 max test – nothing like running an increasingly steeper treadmill incline with an oxygen mask vacuum-packed onto your face to wake you up!

The program also included bike VO2 max testing, as well as analysis of each physical aspect of triathlon performance: movement and range limitations, muscular balance (or imbalance, as the case may be), any injuries if present, personalized bike fitting, in-depth swim stroke and run form analysis (including videotaping), deep tissue massage, and a few endurance training sessions. But the key (and in my mind, revolutionary) concept was the core strength training philosophy at

the center of all API activities. There is some conceptual overlap with the Pilates and Egoscue and probably other training methods; the unique part of the program is how they develop and apply customized, personalized routines for your particular training needs.

The Core philosophy is described in verbal and visual detail in the Core Performance book and DVD, but in essence, it shows how development of the fine muscles making up your body's "pillar" is imperative to overall strength, injury prevention, and unsurpassed athletic efficiency. In triathlon, for example, we are often taught to develop sport-specific strength, and we end up excessively developing the muscles used for linear movement, while neglecting the supporting muscles. The strongest triathlete could try to stand on one leg while raising the opposite arm, and fall over, because the hip musculature used for lateral balance is weak.

Triathletes, runners, and team players of all kinds also frequently end up with chronic muscular tightness. What good does it do to be a fast runner if you can't run fast when you get off the bike because your hip flexors are too tight? In addition to strengthening, the Core program incorporates its own methods for stretching to help alleviate such problems.

Darcy Norman, a tall blond with an athletic wife and look-alike son who doubles as a physical therapist and trainer, put considerable energy into making our stay productive. On Wednesday, a short schedule day, he and Paraic (the bike fit specialist) accompanied Quentin and me on a 2.5-hour ride in Tempe and surrounding areas. A note about Tempe: It is flat, and hot in early September. By the time we were rolling at 6:25 AM it was heating up nicely. I went through bottles like they were eyedroppers.

Craig Friedman helped us early in the week with movement exercises and running drills. I have never seen anyone bounce a ball off a wall with such speed and accuracy, using only strength from his hips!

Tuesday was our first swimming day. Anita introduced herself to each of us individually, and got a feel for our swimming background. Sweet, friendly and modest, Anita replied quietly when I inquired about her own swimming background, "I was in the '92 Olympics." This was Anita *Nall*, the former breaststroke world-record holder! Seeing her demonstrate stroke, despite her recent lack of practice and current pregnancy with second child, was a thing of beauty. The water made no sound as she glided down the pool. Anita is a gifted instructor who frequently teaches children. Her sense of humor, enthusiasm and endless patience are perfect for the job. Notably, both Quentin and I showed marked improvement in our form, speed and stroke counts after just four sessions with Anita.

I was pleased and impressed with the nutritional counseling Amanda Carlson offered. I found her presentations solid and sensible, and was glad to see that she emphasized frequent eating, and pointed out the potential shortcomings of low-carb and other trendy diet plans. She also exhibited an interest in learning more about endurance training and racing nutrition, and had already begun researching the topic. (Endurance training is a relatively young topic at API, but no doubt knowledge will develop quickly among API's athletic brain trust.)

I certainly wouldn't want to under-credit any of the training staff at API; I could clearly see those who didn't work directly with us spending enormous amounts of energy and attention perfecting their own clients' work. Clientele during my session included Arizona State University baseball and basketball players, a talented soccer-playing girl who looked about nine, various recreational athletes rehabilitating from injury or just improving fitness, and at least three professional basketball players. The first two were obvious, being 6'10" and 7'5". I didn't identify Travis Best as the 10-year NBA pro until we were talking and he revealed who he was. He may be 5'11", but the man can jump!

The most fascinating and revealing aspect of my week at API was that in every discipline, my weaknesses were diagnosed consistently. The crossover was startling – for example, how hip and abdominal tightness could limit body rotation in the water. I'd been plagued by pain and weakness in the right hip region, and extreme tightness in the gluteus muscles and hip flexors. My run times off the bike this year were averaging :30 per mile slower than the pace I could hold at the track! My 10K at one race was so painful and inefficient the race photos show me almost

doubled over. Even the bike ride, usually a decent weapon, was slowing down due to lost power. Where was all the power going? I couldn't seem to strengthen that weak side and get my knees aligned properly, no matter what I tried. A firm believer in massage, I branched out to deep tissue, Active Release Therapy and Rolfing, sometimes trying two massage sessions in one week. I stretched like a madwoman, did single-leg press to try and even myself out, took baths in hot Epsom salts. Things improved, but something about the way I was actively using my muscles was destructive, and I couldn't keep up with recovery. I was still TIGHT and feeling like any hard work I did was for naught.

The physical therapy exam and extensive testing at API showed that I was indeed shamefully weak in the gluteus and hip region, especially on the right side. And, weak muscles, when worked, mean tight muscles. I'd developed bizarre compensatory movements on the bike and in the water, twisting my body in strange, wiggly patterns to make up for weakness. In swimming, a curvy line does not a fast time make! I am also what they called "hypermobility" (I'd heard this diagnosis before, interestingly). This means my joints can be so flexible that it's difficult to keep my bodily movements efficient and in-line. Hypermobility can also make a body more prone to injury. Seeing my own flailing arms in the water, and watching vigilantly in the mirror as I attacked new strength and balance exercises, was totally eye-opening.

Paraic (an Irish name pronounced more like "Poric") McGlynn, though not on the API staff, was every bit as helpful and enthusiastic as the rest. Soft-spoken, logical and quick with a wrench, Paraic worked closely with Darcy to create the most comfortable and productive bike position for each of us. This was the first time I'd really had a bike fitted to my body, rather than the other way around. I've had some very good bike fittings in the past, but the tendency in triathlon is to fit a rider to a particular aero-position "template." The fitter may get excited at the prospect of a fast and flexible rider, and proceed to slam the bars down and crunch up the torso in an effort to maximize speed. Over the long term, this approach may lead to subtle discomfort or strain in certain areas of the body. I've always believed that being able to sit comfortably on the seat and breathe easily are the first priorities; if this meant I'd have to do an Ironman on a beach cruiser, then I'd rather do that than suffer!

I came away from API with a new bike fit, a customized and detailed prescription for strength training, new knowledge of how to prepare for and recover from workouts, and renewed motivation. The trainers and specialists who had worked with me offered follow-up email consultation, should I run into any uncertainties. (Darcy has promptly answered my questions regarding strength workouts.) We were also handed stylish leather gear bags, copies of Mark Verstegen's Core Performance, a massage stick, drink bottles and various other pieces of core exercise paraphernalia. Before I attended API, I felt overwhelmed by the wealth of information out there about how to strengthen and stretch. How was I going to pick exactly what to do and fit it into my already-full schedule? Now I have a new focus and a realistic plan.

When I embarked on my first solo core strength training session at my local 24-hour Fitness, armed with book and diagrams, I could hear Darcy's voice calling, "Knee out, push the knee out, fire the glutes!" as I performed exercises. By the end of the week we were practically walking everywhere with fired glutes, like Russian soldiers. Craig and Darcy deserve some kind of award for "Most-fired Glutes."

My visit to API was highly productive, somewhat exhausting (in a good way), and incredibly inspiring. Training at the facility was like being in an athlete's fantasy camp. None of us wanted to leave! It was refreshing and mind-boggling to be immersed in an environment that was fully supportive of our training efforts. How refreshing, not to be distracted by the usual public gym environment, or rushed, for a whole delicious week. (Note that, while our session didn't involve lots of high-intensity training, a week at API should not be taken lightly, or considered a "recovery week.") The family-like feel among the staff made for a warm, relaxed environment in which to focus on athletic improvement.

I would highly recommend an API visit to just about anyone! The programs are not inexpensive, but you get a lot for your money. The type of program I attended requires an open mind and a disciplined commitment to follow-up work. API is still a young facility (about three years), and

currently the locations are in Tempe and Los Angeles, but there are great possibilities for expansion and localization.

If you go, drop any ego at the door and prepare to feel like a novice with some of the exercises. Remember that nothing is impossible, and take heart; improvement comes quickly! You might even find that your motivation increases once you learn how to apply the philosophy. Non-stretchers beware; you might develop a sudden fanaticism for stretching!

More information about API is available at <http://www.athletesperformance.com>.

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