

by Dan Steele

TRAINING FOR THE RACE

TIPS TO HELP YOU PREPARE YOUR SUMMER STAFF

Effortless. At least, that's the way he made it look. The other men were at least three meters behind him when he crossed the finish line. As the camera zoomed in I could read his lips: "Still the fastest man alive!"

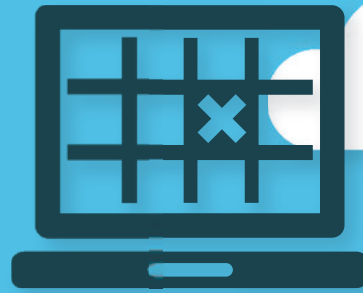
Usain Bolt had gained another gold. I quickly dismissed the daydream that I could perhaps claim the title one day, and thought instead, "How does someone reach this level of excellence?"

My search for an answer led me to an interview where Usain explains his thoughts. "The race is won during training. No one trains harder than me. No one takes training more seriously." He prioritizes training. ▶

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Prioritize Training

ASSEMBLE YOUR TEAM



MAKE TIME FOR TRAINING



Prepare People

WARM UP



SET GOALS AND EXPECTATIONS



PRACTICE LIKE IT'S RACE DAY



Produce Good Things

STAFF UNITY



EFFECTIVE AND EQUIPPED COUNSELORS



A SAFER WEEK FOR CAMPERS



KEYS TO TRAINING A SUCCESSFUL TEAM

We, as camping professionals, will probably never become the fastest humans. No offense. But we do have a summer race ahead of us that deserves preparation. We must prepare our staff (and ourselves) to run the race that is set before us. It should not be an after thought; it's essential that we make time to train.

As the director of marketing and personnel at River Valley Ranch (Manchester, Maryland), I've got my own opinions about and tactics for training. But I value the perspective of my fellow camp and conference center leaders, so I've invited a few others to share their own wisdom and insights as well. The following are what we have found to be the keys to training a successful team:

Prioritize Training

First, we must buy into the idea that training is a priority. We would never go out and run a marathon without first dedicating ourselves to training. So much attention would be placed on training that our schedules would change, our diets would improve and we may even start wearing unbecoming spandex! The point: We would prioritize training. The same value must be placed on training our staff for the most meaningful summer of ministry they will ever experience.

Assemble your team. Aside from bringing a team together and getting them on board

with your mission, understanding how to do their jobs is essential to a summer that can run smoothly. Besides a chance to let staff get to know

each other, which is important, Jim Rebsamen, former program director at



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Master's Inn Ministries (Altavista, Virginia), says that during their training time, "Weighty matters of camper safety, program procedures, and one-on-one ministry training take precedence."

Make time for training. At Forest Springs (Westboro, Wisconsin), executive director Pat Petkau devotes ample time to training their summer staff. "Our Counselor Training Institute is a focused, two-week training that emphasizes purposeful ministry and unity," Petkau



explains. This training time also includes an exam, "where all counselors must physically do every activity that a camper may want to do during a week of camp."

Prepare People

Years ago I was part of a staff training week where the majority of time was spent preparing the property. We mowed grass, moved gravel and made signs, but spent little time training people. When campers arrived we were grossly unprepared, but you could have eaten off the floors. Both people and property are important, but training week should first focus on preparing people. If we fail to do this, the first two weeks of camp become "practice weeks," providing a mediocre experience to campers who expect and deserve more.

Here are a few ideas that will help each portion of your training week focus on people:

Warm Up. Correct training always begins with a good stretch. A great way to warm up your staff is with a great first impression. Wow them and show them that they are valued right off the bat. The atmosphere set on this first day will set the precedent for the next few months.



At Pine Cove (Tyler, Texas), chief ministry officer Craig Langemeier and his team "try to memorize names before staff even arrives. Each area leader has summer staff pictures and names on their wall for prayer and for familiarity."

Janet Anderson, program director at Inspiration Point (Clitherall, Minnesota), recommends pairing up new staff with previous staff. "The experienced staffer [can guide] them through the first day and connects with them throughout training to mentor and encourage."



Practice like it's race day. Prior to a race I love to run the actual race-day course. By doing this, terrain that was once unfamiliar can now inform my decisions during the race. I know where the hills are, I know how to pace myself and I know when to expect the finish line. Incorporate real camp schedules and situations into training week to set a standard for the upcoming race.

JD Kilmer, program leader at Crista Camps (Poulsbo, Washington), recommends organizing your orientation week on a similar schedule as a camp week. "This gets new staff acquainted with waking up and eating at scheduled times, and it allows them to experience what they'll soon be teaching campers."

At Inspiration Point, Janet Anderson encourages other camps to "use actual past scenarios from camp to teach new staff your approach toward discipline. Have staff act out correct and incorrect ways of dealing with each circumstance."

As we all can relate, what starts off as a strong summer doesn't always end with as much energy and effort. Jon Bisset, executive director at River Valley Ranch, says that he likes to "share the potential 'staff cycle of decline,' which shows the decline in attitude and performance that could happen if we are not on our guard." He says that they will discuss ways to counter the potential pitfalls so performances continue to improve as the summer progresses.

Set goals and expectations. A "people-focused" coach sets goals for his team and clearly communicates his expectations for performance. Remember, once you set a standard of performance, it's up to you as a leader to hold your people accountable to that



standard. This starts during training.

"From day one we set clear standards, and then we actually hold staff to them," says Craig Langemeier. He acknowledges that "confronting can be difficult, but it is so needed. Standards and accountability coupled with incredible love causes growth in Christ."

Jim Rebsamen, at Master's Inn Ministries, emphasizes the importance of clarity and communication. "Make sure each staff member has a clear job description. Communicate the way in which you will be evaluating his or her work performance throughout the summer." ▶

**INCORPORATE REAL
CAMP SCHEDULES AND
SITUATIONS INTO
TRAINING WEEK TO
SET A STANDARD FOR
THE UPCOMING RACE.**

EXTRA INFO

A PRACTICAL EXERCISE FOR CAMP STAFF

Many training weeks include a night designed to confess sin and ready hearts for a summer of ministry. At River Valley Ranch we call that night CO2 Night. Not only is the name representative of the carbon dioxide that we exhale (a picture of getting rid of bad things to make room for good things), but it also stands for:

CAST OFF 2 things.

Those two things are weights and sin and that so easily entangle us. We've historically held this evening at an outdoor location and include music, a challenge and a time where summer staff can — in a symbolic way — confess and release sin and weights. We've even shared communion together, which was super meaningful and unifying.

Typically, counselors will remain around a bonfire worshipping together for hours after the event is "over" (which is a reason to schedule this as the last event of the day). When reading through the final summer evaluations, it's amazing to see how many staff members refer back to this evening as the most memorable time of their summer. Consider scheduling a similar event that prepares more than just the outward person.

—Dan Steele

Produce Good Things

Good training produces results. I've never been a great runner, but after three months of training I could run three miles in 20 minutes. When I'd started it had taken over 30 minutes! Here are just a few of the positive outcomes of staff training:

Staff Unity. We all know that unity doesn't just happen; it's cultivated. We must be intentional in building solidarity in staff. We can probably all attest to the value of having our staff worship together, but there are other ways camps can help build unity among their teams.



John Zeigenfuse, director of programming at River Valley Ranch, encourages you to "budget money each summer for staff events that are designed to build unity. It's worth it! The ROI is a great program all around."

John Estes, CEO at Woodlands Camp (Cleveland, Georgia), takes a hands-on approach at creating unity with his team. "I give housing assignments for every stage of the summer, including training camp, and I assign vehicles when we go places. [This is] all for the purpose of stirring the pot, breaking down cliques and building unity."



Dan Steele's first taste of camp ministry was at River Valley Ranch in 1998. He never left.

He serves Christ as RVR's Director of Marketing and enjoys speaking at camp, good humor, creativity and seeing others thrive. He uses his disguise as a marketer to pursue his real passion — people. You can email Dan at dsteale@rivervalleyranch.com.



Effective and equipped counselors.

This is perhaps the top goal of training: counselors who know how to act and react in real camp situations.

This could be something as straightforward as teaching your counselors how to interact with campers. But for more serious topics, some camps bring in professionals for training.

Jon Estes works with an organization called Darkness 2 Light. "It has fantastic content. Our staff walks away with an understanding of what to look for and where to turn if they suspect abuse," Estes shares.

Nick Powell, program director at Echo Ranch Bible Camp (Auke Bay, Alaska), says, "We have a suicide prevention instructor come out to camp and present information to our staff on what to say to a camper who may be struggling in this area."

A Safer Week for Campers.

Ben Franklin was right when he said, "An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure." Camper safety is a priceless benefit of training. It is worth the time and energy you spend training your staff to see and prevent potential danger.



Aubrey Balk, challenge course manager at River Valley Ranch, reinforces the idea of having staff members participate in the various experiences campers may have, especially adventure elements. "Ground training is foundational, but once they have experienced each activity from a camper's perspective, they are even more alert and safety conscious."

John Zeigenfuse, also at River Valley Ranch, shared a unique training element they have for staff. He explains that they will ask a camper's parent to write a letter to the summer staff about caring for her most prized possession — her child. The parent is then invited to come read the letter to the staff. "This puts camper safety in a whole new light. It's raw and real — very powerful," Zeigenfuse says.



As we begin planning for the training of this summer's staff, let us also remember eternity. We're not just training so campers have a good time for a summer; we are readying our staff to share the Good News of Jesus Christ, and to run with endurance the race that is set before them. That's worth making time to train. ●

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