

Semper Fi Triathlon Camp – San Diego, 2008

I spent the past week in San Diego at the 32nd Street Naval Base conducting a triathlon training camp. What made the camp so unique was that it was comprised of 6 wounded Marines and two wounded in combat Navy officers. The flight to San Diego began with my noted irony of a *female* pilot and two *male* flight attendants. I thought of this as an omen. I was about to conduct a triathlon training camp for a group of mostly male triathletes who had some type of injury – amputation, spinal cord or traumatic brain injury.

The camp was sponsored by the US Paralympic organization and the Semper Fi Foundation. The goal was to bring together wounded military, provide them coaching, technical, nutritional and equipment advice and support. The camp would also serve as a way to identify potential talent for the Paralympic organization.

Upon arrival I was driven to the Olympic Training Center in Chula Vista, CA. This facility is one of three Olympic Training Centers in the US – Colorado Springs and Lake Placid being the other two locations. If you ask me, the Chula Vista location has the most scenic running track in the county. It also has a state of the art weight room, video taping abilities, and training room. Basically any sport that competes outside uses this facility.

At the OTC we spent time introducing the athletes to other sports outside of triathlon – shot put and javelin. These events are medal sports for the Paralympics and we wanted to see if any of these athletes showed promise in either or both of these events. In addition to the throws I was able to video tape each athlete running, provide video feedback of their form and go through various types of drills and training programs based on their “unique abilities”.

My goal for the camp was to view each athlete and to develop a training plan based on his/her “ability” versus looking at them as having a “disability”. For me, coaching is about looking at each person and trying to figure out a training plan that works best for them. In other words, everyone has a “unique ability”.

Day One: of the camp we spent at the OTC, throwing, running, filming and going over the details of the remaining week of training. I quickly figured out who was “coachable” and who would need a bit of Lisa’s boot camp. There were those who were open minded to suggestion and then there were those who already knew it all. My job was to get everyone to find value in coaching and to help identify possible talent.

Day Two: Was spent at the Navy Medical Center swimming pool and then back to the OTC track. The pool training proved to be very challenging. Two of the soldiers had not been in a pool since their injury – double leg amputation, one leg above the knee (AK) and the other leg below the knee (BK), the other soldier was a paraplegic with a T12 spinal cord injury. They both were understandably tentative to get into the water but once they did their time was spent figuring out how to float, move and eventually

train. Trying to keep your head and upper body above water when you are missing your legs or if your legs have no feeling or movement is majorly difficult! The rest of the day we were back at the OTC track running, working on bio-mechanics and going over form drills.

Day Three: Endurance Bike ride on base at Camp Pendleton. After getting the group set up with bike gear, equipment, fuel and a description of the route we took off for a 38 mile ride. Two athletes were using a hand cycle which is a recumbent bike that has been designed so that you use arm pedals instead of leg pedals. At top speed hand cycles can really cruise! The rest of us were on road bikes and because we all had different abilities I needed to recruit a few extra riders to help keep the group from splintering too much. TrainingGoals.com athlete, Ed Bonanni came down from Huntington Beach to ride with “Rizzo” (Katherine Ragazzino) who was on a bike for the first time since her accident (TBI). Rizzo was only woman in the group and added a lot of life, no wonder Ed ended up riding with her! On a more serious note, Rizzo confided to me after day two’s swimming workout that that night was the first time she had actually felt happy since her injury. I found her comment heart warming and yet very understandable. Working out and elevating your heart rate does in fact increase serotonin levels in your body which acts as our “happy pill”. I found it interesting that no one on her medical team recommended or promoted exercise as part of her treatment.

Immediately after the bike ride we grabbed a few snacks, put on our wetsuits and headed over to the beach. The air temperature was about 65 degrees but the water temperature was only 54 degrees with 4-6 foot surf. I attempted to have a buoy placed off shore but the surf was so strong it kept drifting out to sea – something I envisioned us all doing! A turning point or shifting of attitudes for this camp came during the swim. Up until this point I felt as if a few of the Marines did not buy into having a woman give them coaching direction. I sensed that it was not a gender bias but rather a feeling of hesitation because none of them had ever been coached by a woman and now was the first time I think they realized that I could actually teach them something. I think we all felt a little uneasy standing on the shoreline looking at the surf and feeling how cold the water was. I knew at that moment I had to be the first to swim out, to brace the cold and the waves and to set the tone. Oh man, it was cold! However, after having to move down the beach about 200 meters because of a rip tide we all managed to settle down and swim beyond the surf. Out in the water I had everyone’s attention. I was able to give them pointers on how to swim in surf, how to sight and swim straight, and how to do a swim drill around a buoy. We spent about 30 min. in the water and when we swam back to the shore I was the last to leave the water. By this time a small crowd had gathered on the beach. You see, all along the shore there were prosthetic legs lined up. Thousands and thousands of dollars and Million Dollar Man technology caught the eye of those walking by. When everyone began to exit the water and hop up onto the shore I suddenly felt uncomfortably normal and a wave of honor and pride swept over me and my two normal legs.

Day Four: Endurance Run / Velodrome / Swim workout. This was going to be a long day and many of the athletes started to show signs of wearing down. I really needed to keep an eye on everyone’s energy levels, fuel intake and attitudes. I did not want them to get so tired that their positive energy was shifted to exhaustion. We started the morning with an endurance run along the 32nd Street Naval Station. The route was along the water front and shipping piers. In dock there was every type of ship

imaginable – cargo, PT, air craft, supply, you name it and it was there. What a thrill to be so close to these crafts. About 20 minutes into the run over large speakers, and I mean loud, morning reveille was played and then the National Anthem. What I did not know is that when on base you must immediately stop what you are doing and stand at attention when these two recordings are played. In the evening Taps and colors are played. It was surreal. When the recording played my runners came to an immediate stop, cars stopped, people stood silent with their arms at their sides and as soon as the recording was over all movement began. What an incredible show of respect.

After the endurance run we made our way over to the San Diego Velodrome. A velodrome is banked cement cycling track typically 200-300 meters long. Now that the X-Games are so popular I think track racing has lost much of its appeal. I was actually a bit shocked at how run down the velodrome was. Weeds had overtaken the in-field, once popular sponsorship signs were all peeling off the side walls and the stands were falling down. The track however was in good shape and you could tell that there were still a few people around who found track cycling a thrilling sport to participate in. Track racing is a Paralympic medal sport so we wanted to introduce this to the athletes to identify potential and to perhaps spark an interest. Most, if not all, of the participants had never been on a track bike or ridden in a velodrome. Track bikes have no brakes and a fixed gear. If you want to stop or slow down you have to coast. Also, the track is banked on the sides and in order to ride up on the side walls you have to maintain at least 12 miles per hour any slower than that you will come to find yourself on the “apron” of the track which is at the bottom of the track near the infield. Craig Griffith, the US Paralympic Track Coach was on hand to provide instruction and support. I was able to sit back and observe the group and also learn a lot about track racing. It took awhile to get everyone up on their gear and moving about the track. You could feel their excitement and it was at this point you could sense that everyone was feeling part of a group. Brad, who is missing both of his legs, worked up the courage to get on a bike and when he was able to let go of his handler and ride unassisted all the other riders stopped and cheered him on. They were now a group of athletes open to being coached.

After the ride we headed to the pool for another swim session. However, I already knew the swim workout would have to be more of a cool down because everyone was hungry, tired and there was a football playoff game soon to start.

Day Five 7:30 am the group headed off to La Jolla Cove for another open water swim and I headed to the airport to catch my flight home. I was not able to attend the open water swim but after the swim we all encountered on Day 5 I was pretty sure everyone would be fine with or without their coach.