

Giving Back: Paying it Forward

Zika and Andy Palmer's ZAP Fitness Center

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Former *Running Times* Senior Writer Andy Palmer structured a life that embraced and entwined the cultures of running and generosity. Before his untimely death at age 48, Andy had spent most of his life helping people at all levels of the sport, from beginner to elite, achieve their full potential as athletes and as human beings. This life-long mission of spreading the running gospel while continually making the running community a better place for everyone crystallized when he met Zika Janes.



Zika and Andy Palmer's ZAP Fitness Center

The two met at a running camp in 1996 when Zika was a student at Emory University. Andy, a two-time Olympic Marathon Trials qualifier and Ph.D. in sports psychology, became a mentor, sometime-coach, and inspiration for Zika. "When we met, I was a mediocre runner. He tried to convince me I could qualify for the Trials if I worked hard enough," Zika says, though she wasn't so sure. Over the next several years, however, Andy and Zika developed a relationship that eventually became a partnership for life when they married in 2000.

They came to the partnership on different paths. Andy grew up in a small town in northern Maine, aspiring to be a basketball player. He had the height, 6 feet 4 inches, and the heart. What he lacked was raw talent. He came relatively late to running as a training vehicle for basketball. On solitary, often snow-covered roads, he discovered he had a talent for running that was well served by his naturally optimistic, introspective nature. An unparalleled capacity for work and unwavering discipline created the environment in which Andy excelled, both as an athlete and as a human being.

In spite of his success as a runner, Andy decided early on that his true talent was in working with other athletes. For more than 20 years he had been the director and eventual owner of Maine Running Camp in Bar Harbor. It was here that Andy discovered his ability to motivate and mold the whole athlete, developing physical, mental, emotional and spiritual aspects of each person he worked with. Andy's philosophy and the MRC slogan, printed each year on the camp T-shirts was "The Mind Is the Athlete." His natural abilities and his academic work conspired to make him the consummate coach and motivator.

Zika, Andy's junior by more than two decades, was a child of the heartland, raised in St. Louis, MO. Like her husband, she came into her own as a runner later than most. Though she ran in high school and college, she didn't start to fulfill her potential until she met Andy, who convinced her to believe in herself and who taught her how to harness talent and desire.

There were many things that bonded this unlikely pair to each other; the most important may have been a dream they both shared. Andy's 1983 marathon PR of 2:16:25 placed him 53rd in the American rankings that year. In 1998, when their idea of an elite training center for post-collegiate distance runners began to take form, the same PR would have ranked him seventh. Zika and Andy set out on a mission to make sense of this alarming statistic and to "raise the bar of American distance running," she says. At their wedding in November 2000, they formally joined their lives, their names, and their dream, creating ZAP, an acronym for Zika and Andy Palmer.

A home for ZAP was found on 68 acres nestled in the Blue Ridge Mountains of North Carolina near the town of Blowing Rock. The location and climate were perfect for running year-round, especially given the proximity to Moses Cone Park, with more than 50 miles of dirt trails. As plans for the facility took shape, Zika created her own niche within ZAP by starting her coursework for a master's in

exercise science from nearby Appalachian State University.

No Secrets

From the outset the guiding philosophy for ZAP was simple: "there are no secrets." The Palmers believed that hard work and intelligent, directed training was the only way to create world-class runners. The athletes they chose had not only to believe in the philosophy, they had to buy into the lifestyle. "We wanted individuals who would be focused, willing to lay it all on the line day in and day out, and who would be willing to live a very Spartan lifestyle. They would have to have the dedication and long term commitment to the sport necessary for them to reach their greatest potential," is how Zika describes it.

As 2001 drew to a close, the finishing touches were put on the ZAP Fitness facility. In addition to apartments for the resident athletes, there was a state-of-the-art bio lab designed by Zika for physiological testing, a weight room, dining hall, offices for staff, and an adjacent lodge able to accommodate up to 24 guests for corporate retreats, adult running vacations, and team getaways. ZAP opened to rave reviews in January 2002.

In February, less than a month after the opening, and with no warning, Andy Palmer died of a heart attack while running the trails of Moses Cone Park.

Carrying the Dream

There was never a doubt in Zika Palmer's mind that she would continue with the training facility. "We had worked too hard together to make this work," she remembers of the very difficult time. In addition to keeping ZAP up and running, Zika also completed her master's degree and continued pursuing her dream of qualifying for the Olympic Trials, which she did in 2003, finishing the Motorola Marathon in 2:45:38.

In July 2002, Pete Rea joined the ZAP team as head coach. Rea, a friend and protégé of Andy Palmer, was trained and mentored by a handful of the country's great runners, like Olympians Pete Pfitzinger and Bruce Bickford, along with Craig and Kare Holm. He came to ZAP with a successful career coaching runners from high schoolers to Olympic Trials qualifiers. Rea's philosophy and vision was a perfect fit for ZAP: "Never compromise your overall goals for short-term success," he sums it up. "Focus on building strength year in and year out. Do not limit yourself, and be sure to enjoy the process as much as the end goals."

At this time there are six resident athletes at ZAP: 3:58.2 miler Ian Conner, three-time NCAA Division I All-American Joseph Driscoll; 2003 U.S. World Cross Country team member Karl Savage; five-time NCAA Division I All-American Dan Wilson; 3:44 1500m man Brian Rosetti; and 10,000m All-American Debbie Thornhill, ZAP's most recent arrival.

Athletes applying to the program go through a rigorous interviewing and evaluation process. Once accepted they receive room, board, coaching, health insurance, travel expenses, gear, physiological testing, and a stipend. In return they must train diligently, contribute to the overall well-being of the program, and devote 15 hours a week to tasks supporting ZAP. These jobs run the gamut from internet web-support to lawn and garden maintenance to kitchen duty.

Since ZAP opened its doors, three of their athletes have made the U.S. World Cross Country team, and five qualified for the Olympic Trials. What's more, every ZAP athlete has had at least one significant PR since arriving in Blowing Rock.

The goals of ZAP fitness are elegant in their simplicity. The first is that the program will create an environment in which a select group of athletes can discover their full potential as runners. It is also the intention and hope of Zika and Rea that each person who takes something away from the facility, whether they came for a week or a year, will eventually give something back to the next generation of runners.

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10 WAYS

to pay it forward

- 1** Support running endeavors with your checkbook. Many organizations stay alive through the generosity of the running community.
- 2** If there is an Achilles Track Club in your area, call and volunteer your time and support. Accompany a handicapped runner during a race.
- 3** Join a local or national conservation group to help protect parklands, trails and open spaces.
- 4** Take care of the roads and trails you run on by joining an "Adopt a Road" or trail maintenance group. Gather a group of running buddies, and spend a day picking up trash on your usual route.
- 5** Donate slightly-worn shoes and apparel to a program like Shoes for Africa or a camp for economically disadvantaged youth.
- 6** For every five races you run, volunteer to work for one. Imagine the impact on racing if all runners followed this dictum.
- 7** Join your local running club and support their activities. It's a great way to help with ongoing projects and meet new training partners.
- 8** Even if you don't have a school-aged child, attend local track and cross country meets. Cheer wildly, especially for those in the back. Ask coaches what you can do to help.
- 9** Work with the next generation. Children's races, fitness and afternoon programs are great ways to introduce ch to the joy of running and a healthy lifestyle.
- 10** Introduce a non-running friend to the sport. Start very slowly. Be patient. This is a gift beyond value you can give a friend.