

Everything's Changing



A forty-something goes to a movement squash camp for teens and finds that age is no longer a barrier to learning a whole new way to play or to making new friends

BY WILL CARLIN

Photographs by Damon Leedale-Brown



IN MY JUNE COLUMN, I mentioned that I was an idiot. The ostensible reason for my claim was that I had signed up to go to a speed, movement, and endurance camp at altitude near Boulder, Colorado. But the situation was compounded by the fact that I also would be the only non-teenager camper.

The camp was the brainchild of Damon Leedale-Brown and his wife, Deborah, who run Reflex Squash & Fitness in Wilmington, Delaware. Damon is a coach who not only holds squash's top coaching certification level, but also has specialized in sports science, movement and conditioning and its application to squash, among other sports.

Despite my stated lunacy, I was excited about the camp. But just after I signed up, I broke my ankle, and due to terrible weakness of character, when I get injured, almost all my training stops. This is not good on a number of fronts, including that I tend to put on weight fairly quickly when not exercising, and this time was no different. With only three weeks of training, I got on the plane at least ten pounds above where I hoped to be, and at least 15 pounds from squash weight. So, when I got off the plane in Denver, I was eager, but I also was nervous. It turned out that I had good reason.

Day One: Sun. 1st July
4:00pm (Lake Estes Park): 25min light jog with active warm-up and yoga-based warm-down.

We came from a number of different places, and we all met at Denver International. I shook hands with my fellow campers: Billy Abrams, 17, from Delaware; Clay Blackiston, 17, from Greenwich; Kevin Cecala, 17, from Philadelphia; John Fulham, 19, from Boston; and, my roommate, Trevor McGuinness, 19, from Philadelphia.

I met James Willstrop (currently #7 in the world, but as high as #2) and Vanessa Atkinson (currently #9 in the world, but former #1 and World Champion), and I said hello to Ollie, the very blond, very cute three ("and a half!") year old son of Damon and Deb.

I chatted for awhile with Jacqui Chiplin, one of our two hosts at a place called Active at Altitude. Located between Lake Estes and Boulder, Colorado, Active at Altitude is a

residential lodge at 8,000 feet created by Jacqui and her husband, Terry, and designed to host athletes who want to live, sleep and train at altitude.

Jacqui and Terry met while running in a race in Bristol, England, and they are devoted runners themselves. They would provide us with our breakfasts and dinners for our time together, and they were relentlessly cheerful hosts with a terrific house that acted as our home ranch.

Once settled, we did a light workout to help us acclimatize. As we started jogging, I found myself struggling for air almost immediately. It was like that moment at the start of a tough match when you are just two or three minutes in, and you think that you are not going to make it; luckily, as with most squash matches, the moment passed, and the breathing got easier. I could tell that



ROCKY MOUNTAIN HIGH The altitude made for exhausting workouts but stunning views of snow in July.

Top row, from left: Vanessa Atkinson, Damon Leedale-Brown, James Willstrop, Trevor McGuinness.
Bottom row, from left: The Author, John Fulham, Billy Abrams, Kevin Cecala, Clay Blackiston.



sprints, however, would be tough... and slightly scary.

When we went to bed, the room was warm, I was still keyed up, and I slept fitfully. I think I had a sense of what was to come.

Day Two: Mon. 2nd July

10:00am (Wonderland Lake, Boulder): 40min running, hill sprints and Indian run. 3:00pm (Flatirons Athletic Club, Boulder): 105min movement and agility session.

When you look at Billy Abrams, you think, "athlete." With a reddish-blond crew-cut and a sleek, muscular build, Billy looks like he could jump into almost any sport and be good. It is no surprise to find out that he plays on both his high school's lacrosse and golf teams in addition to being a nationally ranked squash player.

Billy has a younger brother, Hunter (also a fine squash player), and you could see his big-brother tendency when he played with Ollie. Billy ignored the fact that Ollie was three and instead talked to him as though they were the same age. Ollie seemed to love that, and he quickly adopted Billy as one of his favorites.

Billy's home club is Reflex Squash & Fitness, and he showed how much experience he has working with Damon when we got on court for movement drills in the afternoon. After a morning workout that was tougher than it sounds (altitude makes sprint recovery really hard), our legs were tired as we took the court without racquets and balls.

Damon had us use a rope ladder on the floor and a small on-court obstacle course to focus on *deceleration* as a crucial linchpin of moving quickly. One-by-one, we moved through the ladder in a number of different quick-step sequences, then accelerated as fast as we could, stopping at the front wall with enough control to place a ball on a cone. Billy had the best technique, by far.

Damon wanted us to be balanced when we stopped, both so that we could execute strokes, but also so that we would be able to quickly move again in a different direction.

I was good at being in control, but something about the way I bend at the hip is just plain off. I lean too far over my front knee, causing me either to pull my rear leg up to begin my backward movement or to use my shoulders and head to snap back to recovery.

After the morning, the workout didn't seem that tough, physically, but it required a lot of concentration and focus on technique.

Day Three: Tue. 3rd July

9:30am (Hall Ranch, Lyons): Two-hour mountain bike ride. 3:00pm (Flatirons Club): 60min strength circuit; 45min racquet skills; 15min basketball.

John Fulham likes to make pronouncements. At various times during the week, he said that he was a "staunch Republican," that he was "very pro war," and that he has "never been completely exhausted." When you probe, however, you find that all his views are much more moderate than his original declarative statement. He is smart and thoughtful, and he likes to provoke. I liked him immediately.

Tall with short dark hair, John is so lean as to be almost angular. He looks like a long distance runner, and he probably is the fittest among us. That served him well on the mountain biking session we did today, because it was brutal.

We started at about 5200 feet and went up another 1600 feet on a course that was at times very steep and pretty scary. Deb was our leader, and because she is a regionally ranked mountain biker, she was able to scamper up the trail very quickly. On the way up, we stopped about six times to regroup, and after awhile, the group sorted itself out roughly in order of ability. John was better than I, but in one of his typical

DRILL SERGEANT Damon gives the group instructions before a set of on-court movement routines.

pronouncements he said, "Will, you are the 'up' man; I am the 'down' guy." So I was pleasantly surprised that by the top, I was the one right behind Deb.

I was glad to let John lead going down, because it was pretty technical at times. There were lots of very steep switchbacks, for example, where you had to go from going very fast to basically stopping your bike while leaning so far back that your body was over the back tire in order simultaneously to prevent the bike from flipping over and to make the sharp turn. John flew on the downhill straightaways, at time going so fast that he scared me. He later admitted that he was on the edge of being out of control.

In the afternoon, we did total body conditioning on the squash court. Damon's philosophy on strength training is that it often is better to use your body to work out dynamically. "Lots of weight machines isolate muscles so well," said Damon, "that they don't help you move quickly on the squash court; squash requires a whole range of muscles to explode together."

So the workout consisted of things like jumping rope, lunges, balancing and bending, body planks, and sit-up-like arches. After the morning, it was more technical and less directly fatiguing, which was welcome.

Then, finally, we got to hit the ball. I played against Vanessa in both a forehand and backhand game, and I was pleased to earn a split by taking the backhand game. For an old guy, I thought, I am hanging in there.

Day Four: Wed. 4th July

8:30am (Fern Lake Trailhead, Rocky Mountain National Park): Five-mile run. Free afternoon (Boulder).

Clay Blackiston is lean and tall, and when he plays squash, his body is so loose as to be almost gangly; he looks like he still is getting used to newfound height. As the youngest of the campers, Clay is object of much teasing, but I think he recognizes that it is based in affection, and he not only takes it with good humor, but also joins in teasing himself.

Clay – like John – looks like a runner, yet he clearly doesn't like pain, and he isn't yet sure how hard he can push. He struggled yesterday on the mountain bike, and this morning on our run, he did well, but he had a few squeals that made all of us laugh.

The run was not easy, but it was amazing to see how much we all had improved in three days. We did a five-mile trail run. Altitude? 8600 feet. And despite needing to watch every single step (we were running over rocks and having to jump little creeks and stay on the path of minor cliffs in a stunningly beautiful setting), we all felt much better than we did on Day One. The ability of the human body to adjust can be stunning.

Damon and Deb planned the camp well in terms of mixing hard workouts with technical ones, and the planned afternoon off was welcome today. We went into Boulder (about 40 minutes away) for the afternoon, and Clay, John and I hung out together.

Clay is a budding romantic, and like many romantics, he is shy around girls he likes. I was exactly the same way at his age (and am more similar today than I would like to admit). It is ironic that romance and shyness often are paired, because what girls want often is hidden from them; I suspect that Clay will be a very good boyfriend when a girl finds him.

This evening, Trevor, Kevin and Billy were cookout chefs on an outdoor grill for the Fourth of July. The food was delicious, but it poured rain just as we finished, so there were no fireworks. Just as well. Sleep beckons.

Day Five: Thu. 5th July

Performance Testing (Flatirons Club & Boulder Center for Sports Medicine): On-court speed / agility assessments; Physiological performance testing.

We split into two groups in the morning today, half of us going to the Colorado Sports Medicine Center for testing, and half of us going with Damon (our camp director) for testing. In the afternoon, the two groups reversed.

I started out with Damon in the morning. He was testing our speed on the court using simulated squash movements with

A COUPLE OF TOP TENNERS Atkinson (back) and Willstrop, each a world top 10, took part in all the training and played with everyone.



laser timers and different “courses” on the court that we had to follow. In raw speed from back of the court to the front and backpedaling back, I was almost half a second slower than the other two guys who were with me. For a two-second sprint, half a second is a lot. Later, in a ten-second sprint to all four corners of the court, I was almost a full second slower than the other guys. Clearly, this day was going to show my age.

Finally, we did a really brutal test. We did the ten-second sprint, rested 20 seconds and did it again and again. Sprint work, at altitude, is really painful because the body is screaming for oxygen, and it often just isn't there. We did this for 18 reps, and I was the slowest of my group (though I actually got faster on each set).

In the afternoon, we went to the Sports testing center. We were put on treadmills and after a 20-minute warm-up run, the pace was increased by four-tenths mph every four minutes. Just before increasing the speed, however, a blood sample was taken, our heart rates were monitored, and we were asked to describe our level of fatigue. The test would determine fitness based primarily around blood lactate levels (the amount of lactic acid you are producing as you work). The trick is that you are supposed to keep going until your blood lactate says you can't anymore.



NEVER TOO EARLY Three-and-a-half-year-old Ollie Leedale-Brown shows good form with his own weightlifting routine.

For me, it took about 75 minutes and about seven miles. I was in the middle of the pack on this one, but I sustained my workout with almost twice as much lactic acid as anyone else, indicating both that I was actually the least fit, but also perhaps that I can tolerate pain pretty well.

I might tolerate it, but I also felt it. I am pooped tonight, and I'm looking forward to something different tomorrow.

Day Six: Fri. 6th July

8:00am (Prospect Mountain, Estes Park): Climbing Trip with Colorado Mountain School. 3:45pm (Medex Health Club, Estes Park): 1 hour spinning class

Trevor McGuinness was the #1 ranked junior in the US last year. A product of Merion Cricket Club and Episcopal Academy, he has shoulder-length light brown hair, and he's big enough to look like a high school football player. Like many people who are brighter than their peers, Trevor is a risk-taker. I have always thought that teenage risk-taking often is a sign of bored intelligence, and if the person can be challenged, they respond.

Trevor was challenged today, when we went rock climbing at a nearby school, and he responded. We arrived early to get sized for our equipment, but once fitted, we were off to the cliffs. We climbed about five different cliff faces of differing difficulties, each about 50-80 feet in height.

Trevor had no real technique at the start of the day, but by the end, he had climbed the most difficult routes of the day. Typical, I thought. But he wasn't the only one who grew during the day; at the start, Clay was very nervous, but as the day went on, he got so into it that he started yelling out the theme to Mission Impossible while climbing and looking cool; you can see how he brings the teasing on himself.

Climbing was a nice change of pace. “If you do the same things all the time, your body adapts,” Damon told us. “Sometimes you need to shock the system to improve.”

In the afternoon, Deb led us in an hour of spinning. I have never really done a spinning class before, but if they are like this one, it is a good workout. She led us up imaginary mountain trails, down hills, and into a series of sprints on the bike.

After, while we were stretching, Trevor showed another side that some of us had noticed all week: Oliver came in about halfway through and started stretching with us, but he really wanted to be near Trevor. From the start of the week, Trevor took little Ollie under his wing more than anyone else; he chased him, tickled him and

played squash with him. I always think that little kids and animals are good judges of someone's innate kindness, and Ollie loved Trevor more than anyone else. 'Nuff said.

That evening, we had dinner in Lake Estes so that we could drive up Rocky Mountain National Park's Trail Ridge Road to 12,500 feet to watch evening descend. We saw snowcapped mountains, Elk that were 15 feet away, and a beautiful sunset. It was one of the highlights of the trip.

Day Seven: Sat. 7th July

10:00am (Flatirons Club): Training demonstration and exhibition match play.
3:00pm (Flatirons Club): 60min match

each teasing each other in an affectionate way. Having them at camp was a huge bonus for all of us as we got to know each of them as people, not just as squash icons.

But at our exhibition match this morning, James got to show off his iconic status as well. A crowd of about 25 people paid \$20 each to come watch us train and see James and Vanessa play. First, we demonstrated some of the movement and conditioning drills that we had been working on all week, then we performed some playing drills.

After that, James played a series of matches against all of us. First up? You guessed it. His handicap against me was

excited to play against us, and we finished with a Q&A session where James fielded about 90% of the questions.

For our afternoon training, we played a series of games that forced us to play tired and get used to it. They were new games to me, but they were interesting and valuable (see sidebar for a selection). Because we actually had to *get* tired to *play* tired, the afternoon session was tough, but – at this point in the camp– what else is new?

Day Eight: Sun. 8th July

5:00pm (Active at Altitude): 60min yoga.

Ahhh... A much needed almost complete day off.

OFF-COURT TRAINING Camp Director Leedale-Brown wanted to make sure that the campers were exposed to a variety of training methods, including (from left) rock climbing (Cecala), mountain biking (Blackiston), and yoga (McGuinness and Abrams).



“If you do the same things all the time, your body adapts,” Leedale Brown says. “Sometimes you need to **SHOCK THE SYTEM to improve.”**

play with integrated movement training; 15min basketball.

James Willstrop is a giant in the squash world. First of all, for a squash player, he is really tall (6'4"), but more importantly, he has been one of the top players in the world since he stormed to the world junior title in 2002. Currently number seven, at the end of 2005, he got as high as number two in the world.

He is supremely talented on the court, surprising viewers and opponents alike with his speed and graceful movement. Off the court, he is generous, funny and polite... until he gets to know you; once comfortable, he likes to “take the piss out of you” by teasing you with sarcastic comments. It is part of the charm of knowing him well.

His relationship with Vanessa is really fun to watch, because they clearly enjoy

that he could only hit rails (yeah, like that would make it even). We were playing one game to seven, point-per-rally. The first point was about seventy hits or so (he won it), and I was so winded (keep in mind the altitude, please!) after the point that I could barely keep up. As soon as it was over, I ran off the court so that everyone wouldn't hear just how hard I was breathing.

Afterwards, James played one-against-two against Trevor and Billy, and the points were tremendously exciting. He played a handicap game against Vanessa (great squash by them both), and then another two-on-one. I was glad to see that he finally was tiring as he lost to Clay and Kevin, 7-6. Then he played straight up against Fulham and won 7-0. Impressive.

The exhibition over, we played a series of one-gamers against the spectators – something I actually enjoy. They were very

We spent much of it watching the Wimbledon final, and because everyone in the room knows what it is like to compete in high-stakes racquet sports, we all started laughing at how frequently we made a comment seconds before the commentator on television made the same point.

In the evening, a yoga instructor came to the house, and taught us yoga on the porch. I thought it was a nice end to a day off, as it was hard, but relaxing at the same time.

In the evening, we got to ask Vanessa and James about their biggest matches. Vanessa is about 5'8" tall with dark red hair, and a very easy laugh. The more you get to know her, the more her beauty sneaks up on you. When she plays, however, her ability is anything but stealthy; it is apparent from the moment she hits the ball.

Try These Three

MOST OF THE ROUTINES that we did during camp require attention to detail and form, so Camp Directors Damon and Deborah Leedale-Brown (top, with son Oliver) would want you to know that doing exercises is about doing them well, with focus on balance and body control, and not necessarily doing them as fast as you can. "Too many people run court sprints as fast as they can without any emphasis on control," says Damon. "They get tired, but they also keep practicing bad movement mistakes." The hint that worked best for me was that if someone yelled "stop!" while you were doing them, you would be able to move in any direction. I found that extremely hard. — WC

Seeing her talent all week made it even more powerful when she told us how long her journey had been to become number one, how filled with self-doubt she often found herself, and how she fought it and still fights it today. Listening to her describe her thoughts was one of the most interesting half hours of the camp.

It was easy to see her and James as real people instead of as great players partly because how much they like being with each other, but to hear about their fears and doubts and how they overcame it was inspirational. I can't wait to root for each of them as they compete this year.

Day Nine: Mon. 9th July

9:30am (Hall Ranch): Two-hour mountain bike. 3:00pm (Flatirons Club): 90min movement & agility.

Another tough day, and it took one of us out.

We got up early to do the mountain bike course that we did last week. Our goal was to do it faster and to do two loops instead of one.

On the second loop downhill, John was leading the gang and going really fast. I was the one behind him, but I was far behind as he barreled down the hill. I didn't see him wipe out, but I saw the result. When I got there, he had cuts on his chin, his elbow, and his leg, but they apparently were nothing compared to the pain he felt in his shoulder.

After regrouping, it was apparent that he could not ride down, so Damon and I walked him down, and it took about an hour or so to get down via foot. He went to the hospital and later was found to be okay, but was told to take about three weeks off from any squash.

We were all a bit down after that, but in the afternoon, we did what Damon calls a "quality workout." For him, quality means that it has three aspects: it works you hard physically, it forces you to focus mentally, and it works on your technical skills. We had three separate courts going, with two of us (including James and Vanessa) on each court.

The workout was not that long and it wasn't exhausting, but it was great, and that combination has changed another of my long-held training philosophies.

Day Ten: Tue. 10th July

10:30am (Chautauqua Park, Boulder): Hill session. 3:00pm (Flatirons Club): Group match play.

Kevin Cecala has light brown wavy hair, and was the only camper who has not yet burned off the last of his baby fat. Interestingly, his slightly more normal looking body coupled with an easy-going smile, made Kevin a charmer. More soft-spoken than the other campers, he also showed a



keen ability for observation and insight. And though his play sometimes looked casual, there still was an inner competitiveness.

Kevin showed his determination in our morning workout, which was the most painful thing we have done so far. The warm-up alone was a slow jog up a big hill, and I was hurting doing even that. That didn't bode well.

We did a series of sprints, one short in length (30 sec), one medium in length (45 sec) and one long in length (1:10). It is hard to convey just how painful that long one was. Almost all of us collapsed at the top, unable to talk for almost a minute.

Kevin was near the middle of the pack on the first set, but he was one of the few that did the second set pretty close to what he had done the first time. I would have been impressed at the time, but I was in too much pain. He smoked me.

The afternoon was a bunch of playing. We did four-minute games where we played point-per-rally games and then rotated so that we each played six different people. I started and ended playing against Kevin. He had left a lot on the mountain, but he never gave up on a point. When we finished, I wasn't surprised that I got a compliment and smile.

On the way back to the ranch, Kevin kept selecting songs on his iPod that he thought I would like, and he was right. Somehow, he had figured that out, too, despite my not remembering ever talking about my taste in music. Interesting guy.

Day Eleven: Wed. 11th July

The Strategic Ghost. One game to eleven, point-per-rally. At any point during the game, each player can tell the other person that they have to "ghost" for 30 seconds. You can do this twice. The person not ghosting directs the ghoster to one of the four corners by pointing.

The Fifth-Point Ghost. Another game to eleven, but at each multiple of five points, both players have to ghost for twenty seconds apiece, with the person who won the last point going first.

The Fifth-Point Advantage. This is the most brutal of the three. At each fifth point, the person who won the last point gets to rest while the other person ghosts for 40 seconds. This tests not only playing while tired, but also winning the big points. If you two are close, the person who wins more fifth points will win most games.

8:00am (Bear Lake, Rocky Mountain National Park): 30 min trail run up to Dream Lake and back.

This morning, while the others slept in, Damon, Deb, Ollie and I went back to Rocky Mountain National Park to see some sights before leaving. Damon told me to take my running gear ("Just in case"). I should have known better.

When we got there, he said that he thought we could fit in a good half hour of running. I said I was game. He asked if I wanted to do a "brutal" run that ended in a really nice view. I said okay. So we set off on a two-mile run that was 100% uphill. Since we were starting out at 9600 feet, let's just say that the camp ended for me much as it began: with a lot of pain.

But for the first time in a long time, I felt myself being able to slip into that magic place where you compartmentalize pain by acknowledging it is there but then choosing not to deal with it for awhile. When I was at my elite best, I used to be able to slip into that place almost at will, and though I am nowhere near that level now, I felt it for the first time in a long time today. Pretty cool.

When we got back, it was all about eating, showering, packing and leaving. As I sat on the plane (I was the first one off), I found myself visualizing Damon moving on the court (and realizing how far I have to go), I found myself looking forward to rooting for Vanessa and James both as players and as a couple, and I found myself missing five teenage boys I now call friends.