

August 2, 2008

## Up a Mountain, Olympic Dreams Are Carved

By [GREG BISHOP](#)

MANITOU SPRINGS, Colo. — The United States Olympic Committee has a sprawling training center in Colorado Springs, a multimillion dollar facility where hundreds of athletes train.

But about 15 minutes away, at the base of Pikes Peak, a trail carved like a scar up the mountain and lined with railroad ties has been, as much as any newfangled training device, the pathway to Beijing for many United States Olympians. Elite American athletes have gathered here for years in search of the most basic and punishing workout: Man versus Hill.

“It’s the one workout where people truly have to face something that is unbeatable,” the speedskater [Apolo Ohno](#) said. “It is you against yourself.”

The trail, known among the athletes as the Incline, gains about 2,000 feet in elevation over the length of about one mile. Olympians call it a beast, a bear and a battle-ax, a source of pride and exhaustion for them.

The wrestler Daniel Cormier first conquered the Incline in 2002. On his drive back to the Olympic Training Center, he developed full-body cramps, and the van carrying the freestyle wrestling team had to pull over so coaches could administer a rubdown.

“It’s not running,” the Greco-Roman wrestling gold medalist [Rulon Gardner](#) said. “It’s not walking. It’s surviving.”

The triathlete Mark Fretta owns the unofficial record up the Incline, 16 minutes 42 seconds, despite a broken collarbone sustained during a bicycle crash in South Africa. The same day he broke the record, Fretta ascended four times.

As the legend of the Incline grows, so does Fretta’s place in it. A reporter called recently from India, wanting to know his secret and asking about his stories.

Like the time Michelle Blessing, a triathlete coach, offered to give her Porsche to any athlete who could run the entire trail. She knew no one would be able to complete the challenge, having herself run the Incline with friends each year on her birthday — all of them dressed as [Marilyn Monroe](#) in high heels, boas and halter dresses.

“The Incline is one of my favorite things about Colorado Springs and a real source of pride at the training center,” Fretta said. “Everybody’s looking for the notch on their belt.”

The Incline’s vertical rise tops out at about 8,500 feet. The trail follows what was once a cable car route that closed after a rock slide in 1990.

This stairway to heaven — or at least to the Olympics — is used by all kinds of athletes at the training center. The

wrestling teams incorporate the Incline into their workouts, as do triathletes, speedskaters, weight lifters and volleyball players.

Sometimes, coaches will call wrestlers at 3:30 a.m. and direct them to the Incline. A few years ago, after three early trips to the Incline, the Greco Roman wrestler T. C. Dantzler had to ask an assistant coach to call his wife and explain that he was not leaving in the middle of the night for another woman.

The wrestler Steve Mocco played nose tackle at [Oklahoma State](#) and still counts the Incline among the most grueling workouts of his life. Mocco, of North Bergen, N.J., revels in standing at the base of the trail at 5 a.m., surrounded by silence, ready to be humbled. Or working his way past the weekend warriors and fitness freaks, all 275 pounds of him pushing forward.

“It’s weird,” Mocco said. “You think of yourself as this great athlete. Then you look left, and there are two grandmas passing you. Then you look right, and a man with a long beard and a walking stick goes by.”

The wrestlers have a single rule: don’t stop. They are reminded of the words repeated often by the assistant Greco Roman coach Momir Petkovic.

“Forget technology,” he says. “It comes down to how much you want it. If you’re in the middle of nowhere, with nothing, you are going to find your way out. You will find a way to become a champion.”

From the bottom, where a no trespassing sign greets them, visitors head north. The first time, no one warns them of the secret. They reach it about two-thirds of the way up, a false peak that from the bottom appears to be the top, one last trick from the Incline gods.

Kevin Jackson, the freestyle wrestling coach and a gold medalist at the 1992 Olympics, wasted all his energy getting to the false peak his first time up. A 65-year-old woman passed him in the final stretch while his wrestlers clapped and cheered.

The Incline is a lot like life that way, Dantzler said. Just when he thinks he has it figured out, there is always another lesson, no matter the strategy or number of attempts.

“Once you think you’ve done it all in terms of training, you come back to the Incline,” Dantzler said. “You need to scratch the bottom of the barrel, get splinters under your fingernails and dust in your eyes. You need to come back with Incline rash.”

An inoperative garden hose sits at the top, one last cruel joke. Olympians pause there for the panoramic view, or run wind sprints, or compare times.

“No matter how many times you do it, the ending never changes,” Petkovic said. “Every time it kicks your butt.”

Athletes say the workout uses every muscle in their bodies. Some take it to another level, like Ohno, who wears a 20- to 40-pound weight vest.

Coaches love the old-school aspect of the Incline.

“The Incline brings you back to the early times, to push-ups and pull-ups and situps and old-fashioned

workouts," Jackson said.

Some coaches even use the Incline as old-fashioned punishment, like the speedskating coach who found that his athletes had been out drinking the night before an intense workout, then took them to the Incline. They vomited halfway up.

As long as they are training, Olympians will return here, for their pride and for the gut check and for the most basic workout of them all: Man versus Hill.

"The mountain is the mountain," Fretta said. "It doesn't move. There is no way to cheat."

And only one way to go: up.

[Copyright 2008 The New York Times Company](#)

[Privacy Policy](#) | [Search](#) | [Corrections](#) | [RSS](#) | [First Look](#) | [Help](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [Work for Us](#) | [Site Map](#)

---