



E I G H T E E N

TAKE IN THE VIEW.

FROM THE MOMENT WE ARRIVED AT THE ARCO OLYMPIC Training Center, Molly and I were in awe of the entire place, so we explored every square inch of its 155 acres. The Olympic rings adorned nearly every facility. Images of Olympic legends filled the center's main buildings. Meanwhile, an Olympic flame burned upon a massive pedestal at the top of the highest hill. A place of prominence to highlight that flame's historic purpose. Just being there was a dream.

For the duration of our ten days at ARCO that January, we stayed in the center's suite-style dorms, where we quadrupled up—four rowers sharing two bedrooms (two rowers in each) and two bathrooms. Each bedroom came with two extra long twin beds, two small closets, and one nightstand with a lamp to share. Although our new “homes” were no larger than typical college dorms, they were what was most important: clean, quiet, and a short walk from everything ARCO had to offer.

We took all of our meals in the dining hall just down the hill from our dorms. Also clean and quiet (most of the time), the dining hall sat central to the site and had a friendly staff that provided meals to suit every need. A welcome break from

grocery shopping and cooking the same simple meals for myself every night.



The flame that ignites possibility.

Farther down the hill from the dining hall sat the track-and-field facility. Where, if you were to stand facing east, you would see the San Ysidro Mountains in the distance with Otay Lake at the foot of them. It was there by the lake that our small boathouse quietly waited.

During the trip, our training schedule carried on similarly to the way it would have had we been back in New Jersey. The main differences being that we could wake up two hours later, and (because of the warm weather) we could row at least twice a day. We otherwise kept our pattern of easy, moderate, and hard training days, days when we did race pieces, days in the weight room, afternoons off, and a little time to cross-train. For which Tom gave us an idea one afternoon.

Because we had rowed nearly 200,000 meters over the course of our first week at ARCO, Tom suggested a change-up. Of the seven of us who had trained together in New Jersey all fall, five—including me, Molly, Susan, and two others—had never been to ARCO before. So on one of the last days of our trip, Tom suggested we go for a run around Otay Lake, then jog up the mountain that overlooked it. He told us that once we reached the top, we should stop and take in the view back west. Not only would we be able to see all of ARCO and Otay Lake from there but also the sunset over the Pacific Ocean.

Tom had sent us on enough “adventure runs” around Lake Mercer by then that we knew to anticipate that this run might take longer and be more challenging than whatever he described. So as he gave us turn-by-turn instructions in his usual “you’ll figure it out” sort of way for how to make it around Otay Lake to the base of the mountain, the five of us listened intently and figured we would be okay as long as we stuck together.

Later that afternoon, we five met outside the dining hall, then headed down the hill, past the track, and toward the boathouse. From there, we veered left off the boathouse’s gravel driveway,

then began running along the edge of Otay Lake toward the base of the mountain that overlooked it.

Because it was January and late afternoon in Southern California, I knew the temperature would only drop for what remained of the day, so I dressed accordingly. My favorite grey hooded sweatshirt over my three-sizes-too-large white dry-fit shirt, with my old Virginia sweatpants rolled up at the ankles. These were the very ones that I wore almost daily back in college. The ones I was wearing on the night that my swimmer friend's roommate mistook me for "a real athlete." They served as a regular reminder of how far I had come since then.

The five of us ran single file along the dusty trail that traced the edge of the lake. The space surrounding us was wide open, while the worn trail was quite narrow due to the tall grass that stood straight up along the sides of it. The cool air smelled of eucalyptus and dirt, with hints of something sweet. The dry leaves and strands of peeled bark from the trees crunched crisp under our feet as we ran. Through the tall trees that lined the lake's edge, I could see the mountaintop itself was a greenish-yellow, dotted with reddish-brown bald spots of dirt and grey lumps—the rocks that lived at the very top. The sky was blue behind the peak.

As we ran, we talked. Tossing jokes back and forth as was our custom. Jokes about practice. Reflections on that incredible trip to ARCO and what a privilege it was to be there. Mostly though, we talked about nonrowing things.

Within a mile or two, we had made it to the end of the lake, where we then scampered up a short slope toward the road in search of the trail Tom had mentioned. When we surveyed the horizon along the road though, not one of us could see a trailhead that would lead us up the mountain. So, keeping the mountaintop in sight, we jogged (still single file) along the white line at the road's edge in search of the trail. Any trail that remotely resembled the one Tom described.

Eventually, we came to an extra wide gate. The kind you would expect to see many times over at a cattle ranch. Figuring it for our destination, we climbed through the wide spaces between its rails, glanced up at the steep mountain, then followed the trail upward. Our lake and ARCO at our backs.

At first, we were relieved to have discovered the gate and trail. However, when the trail began to wind farther away from not only Otay Lake and ARCO but also the mountain, we recognized something was wrong and stopped. Because we were completely new to the area, we conferred there for a moment. Then, considering how long we had already run, we decided our best bet was to hang a left off the trail and trudge straight up the side of the steep mountain. Rather than simply finding our way, we instead chose to make one.

Our new route was pretty manageable for the first few minutes, so we continued to jog. But as the hill grew steeper, and ARCO and Otay Lake became smaller, we slowed under the climb's abruptness. At first, we were annoyed with ourselves for getting lost and having a tougher time on our run than expected. Before long though, we could not help but laugh. It was not the first time something like this had happened to the five of us.

We could have easily turned back as soon as it became obvious we had gone the wrong way, but we carried on because we were undeniably intent on making it to the mountaintop. Susan, Molly, and me the most. For as far as our naive persistence had taken us, there really was no turning back. As we continued upward along our abruptly steep climb, our excursion, without question, had irreversibly transformed from adventure run to full-on hike.

Still, we laughed...

Every once in a while along our vertical trudge, we lost sight of the peak due to the steep angle of the climb itself. Whenever that happened, I had no choice but to lean forward, match the grade with my body, stare only at the grass before me, and clutch

it to keep from tumbling backward down the hill. While the air moved dryly around me, the grass felt cool and moist between my fingers. Its blades thick and secure.

The farther we trudged, the clearer it became that my progress was noticeably easier on all fours. So that was how I proceeded. Safely on all fours, clutching the grass.

With my newly discovered grass grips to aid my upward progress, I only every now and again took my eyes off what was in front of me to check my heartrate monitor. Once my heartrate exceeded 165 beats per minute while simply walking up the hill, I decided to stop looking at my watch. I did not need a number to reinforce just how hard of a climb it was. Instead, I focused on nothing but the grass until at least another five minutes passed. At which time, I glanced up to be sure we were still headed toward the peak.

The higher we climbed, the faster the sun seemed to set, and the cooler the grass felt. Until finally, right when I felt the peak was within our grasp, I heard a strange noise coming from above us a short distance up the slope. When I scanned the ridge, I made out the image of two people easily running along. Horizontally running along.

As we inched nearer to them, the two people I thought I saw yelled down quizzically and jokingly, “What the heck are you guys doing down there?”

It was Megan, one of our day-one-of-practice-at-Mercer teammates, and Liane, one of the spares from the previous year’s Olympic team. Both were more experienced than the five of us. Both had been to ARCO in the past. Both had climbed that mountain in the past, too, and so knew where the real trail was. Neither of them, however, had wanted to join us when we originally set off on our run that day.

When we made it to the ridge where we had seen them running easily along, we discovered an extra wide trail that was flat

and broad enough for a car. And on it, Liane and Megan were running in the direction of the peak, laughing as they ran. We could not help but laugh too.

Once all five of us were off the side of the mountain and finally standing on the wide road, we fell in behind Megan and Liane, then followed them the rest of the way to the top. A few minutes later, all seven of us were at the top, where we finally took in the view.

By the time we made it to the peak, the sun was well on its way to set, so we quickly made our way back down along the correct trail with Megan and Liane as our guides. A much faster trip than the route we had made on our own.

Though we had not taken the intended trail that day, we figured out a way to get to the top because we were so intent upon that view Tom had mentioned. A view that was more than worth it because we made it to the top together, laughing at our predicament, and never once giving up on ourselves. In doing so, our climb (and that view) became another small moment that brought us together even more...as a team.

As we neared the bottom of our hike, I barely made out the image of a small car as it rounded the curve of the road toward the base of the mountain. As the car neared, I recognized it was Laurel, our assistant coach, in her tiny rental car. It was nearly dark by the time we made it to the road where she was. The sky was no longer pink and orange, but rather those last remaining purples and blues before nightfall when the stars would soon take over. Because it was nearly dark, and we had been gone for a few hours, far longer than we should have been, Laurel, a little worried, came looking for us. She often looked out for us like that—in a protective mother hen sort of way.

Though I can only describe her car as nothing other than tiny, we seven piled into it on top of one another while Laurel sarcastically chuckled at our nonsense. Once we managed to squeeze

the doors shut, we gave the signal, and Laurel drove us home. All of us completely tickled by our adventure.

Tom was right. The view was amazing. Made all the better because of that tough climb. The one we did *together*.

Three days later, we flew back home to New Jersey. Back to our frozen lake. Back to our routine of indoor training mixed with the occasional adventure run. Sometimes through the snow around Lake Mercer. Always together. And rather than sleeping in and eating in a dining hall, it was back to rushing to work between training sessions and going to bed exhausted.

Even though I was still toward the bottom of our training group when we left ARCO that January, I was more devoted than ever to rowing and to what our small team was building together. As a result, I became even more willing to do whatever it would take to progress. Which, at that point, meant focusing on what was right in front of me and taking it one step (or crawl on all fours) at a time with my teammates by my side and the occasional glance to the top.

January 2005,

There was a short movie about the Olympics playing at the ARCO Spirit Store, so Mols and I went to see it. It made me cry. A seven-minute film made me cry...within the first minute...

All of a sudden, I realized how much I would like to go to the Olympics, or even Worlds for that matter. There are seven months from now until Worlds. A lot can happen between now and then, for better or for worse. This is my first step toward better.



My first trip to ARCO.