

SUMMER RITUALS | CAMP SHOWDOWN

Red vs. White



Marcus Yam/The New York Times

At Camp Wah-Nee in Torrington, Conn., Color War is a four-day blitz of competition.

By ELISSA GOOTMAN
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Torrington, Conn.

Summer Rituals

Camp Showdown

A weekly series on what makes summer summer for people in and around New York.



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"You have to deal with these issues of winning and losing," said Dave Stricker, the owner of Camp Wah-Nee, "because life is a contact sport."

IT was the top of the fourth inning here at Camp Wah-Nee and the Red Team freshmen were down 15-4. At the plate was Joe Miller, a sweet-faced 8-year-old from New Jersey whose love of baseball is so great that he listens to Red Sox games on headphones while trying to fall asleep.

He made contact and dashed to first base. Then he tried to make it to second.

"Come back!" yelled Daniel Hughes, 21, a counselor who was pitching for Red.

Joe spun around and raced back, but was tagged out before he got to the bag. He looked at the counselor, betrayed. "You shouldn't have told me to do that!" he called, his eyes welling with tears. "It's all your fault, Danny!"

Taking refuge under the bleachers, Joe began to cry. "He made a bad call!" he sobbed. "What a bad call!" Another counselor tried to comfort him, but Joe was not ready to be consoled. Yet another scooped the boy up and plopped him on top of the bleachers, where he watched the action, a single tear rolling down his cheek.

Harvey Mandell, the boys' head counselor, wandered past. He sat down next to Joe, swept his arm around him and, in the voice of a loving grandfather, began to speak about winning and losing, good plays and bad plays, the Yankees and the Mets.

"It was a call that didn't work out, O.K.," he told Joe. "It happens in the major leagues, even."

This was not, of course, the major leagues. It was bigger. It was Color War, the four-day blitz of competition at the end of every summer when Camp Wah-Nee is divided in two. Red. vs. White. It was everything.

The freshman baseball game was among the first of some 400 events spread out over those four intense, passion-filled days. Wah-Nee's 375 campers — ages 7 to 17 and split into two teams during a furtive 1 a.m. confab by the eight counselors secretly tapped as generals and lieutenants — duked it out in soccer and dodgeball and table tennis and capture the flag.

There were rope-burning contests that sent them scrambling into the woods for tinder, a game called hooter ball that involves knocking down a tennis-ball can with a softball (harder than it sounds), and the creation of team plaques that will forever hang in the dining hall. There were competitive lip-syncing performances, one-act plays and what seemed like an endless stream of basketball games.

Then, on Tuesday evening, everyone gathered on the basketball court, Reds sitting with Reds and Whites with Whites, as each team belted out a brand-new Wah-Nee alma mater that its leaders had stayed up long past curfew to write.

But before all that there was the freshman boys' baseball game, where little Joe Miller ended up scoring twice, helping Red make a stunning

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comeback to win, 17-15. Afterward, as White and Red T-shirts streamed off the field, 8-year-old Jack Jacob, whose hair was painted Red, dashed up to Luke Jamieson, a White counselor. "In your face, Jamieson!" he cried.

"No, no, no," the counselor replied, sweaty eyebrows raised. "We win with class and we lose with class."

AT Camp Wah-Nee there is a saying, 10-4-2: We live 10 months of the year for the two we spend at camp. It could just as well be 45-4-4: We live 45 days of camp for the four we spend in Color War. They are the most eagerly anticipated, the most dramatic, the most formative.

Several sleep-away camps claim to have invented Color War, said Leslie Paris, an associate history professor at the University of British Columbia who spent years investigating the matter while writing "Children's Nature: The Rise of the American Summer Camp." The earliest reference she found: "Red and Gray Week" in 1916 at Schroon Lake Camp, a Jewish boys' camp in the Adirondacks. By the 1920s, Dr. Paris said, Color Wars composed of a series of small contests, from checkers to swimming races, were a staple of the camp experience. As far as anyone knows, Wah-Nee opened in 1931 (though it was called Nee-Wah) and Color War was among its earliest traditions.

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For years, Timber Lake Camp in the Catskill Mountains — which calls the competition Marathon — was famous for elaborate break-out ceremonies studded with celebrities, like Hulk Hogan or [Shaquille O'Neal](#) or the aptly named [Justin Timberlake](#). In 2002, when [Tobey Maguire](#)'s "Spider-Man" was the summer's hottest movie, Timber Lake staged a mock wedding between two staff members that was interrupted by multiple people dressed in Spiderman costumes, creating the illusion of Spider-Man jumping from building to building. Interrupting the spectacle: none other than Mr. Maguire himself declaring that the games had begun.



Dodge ball is among the events that pit Red against White.

Jay S. Jacobs, who owns Timber Lake, stopped with the celebrities several years ago, after [Paris Hilton](#). "I didn't think of at the time, or know, that she had done this sex video," he recalled. "It didn't go over with some of the parents." Plus, "we were sending the wrong message for what we're about."

At Wah-Nee, which prides itself on being down-to-earth (the seven-week session cost \$8,500 this year, compared with Timber Lake's \$10,000), there were never celebrities, though one year the "break" involved rousing campers from bed at 1 a.m. and shepherding them to a field for a laser light show featuring flying saucers (frisbees). The exact timing and nature of each summer's break is like a state secret: Dave Stricker, who owns Wah-Nee with his wife, Donna, did not tell even his top counselors until the day before that Color War would break the following night, with fireworks.

As other camps have gotten rid of Color War or changed its name amid parental fears over hypercompetitiveness, Wah-Nee has made a few concessions.

The Strickers did away with silent lunches in the mid-1990s, concerned it was not healthy for children to run around all morning, then find themselves unable to vocalize their desire for more turkey. There is a strict "No Color War in the bunks" rule, after summers of Red girls refusing to sleep next to their White friends, and boys on opposing teams finding themselves in fistfights. The staff has lately debated whether the team plaques should be scored or just admired. But at Wah-Nee, war is part of Color War.

"You have to deal with these issues of winning and losing, because life is a contact sport," said Mr. Stricker, who grew up attending other summer camps and first came to Wah-Nee as a counselor three decades ago. "Camp is transformative; it should be for kids if it's run well. And Color War is a microcosm of that transformative experience."

ON Sunday evening, Day 2 of Color War, the Lodge — an oversize cabin that is more like a college dorm, with a living room and bedrooms off a long hallway — was abuzz with requests to borrow clothing and other sounds of teenage girls readying for a big event.

"Can we shower?" one Lodge girl after another asked their counselor.

"You're playing tennis afterwards!" she answered again and again.

Soon all the Lodge Girls, who will be in 9th and 10th grades, were dressed in black shirts and shorts. They filed down a hallway painted with lyrics from alma maters written during Color Wars past. They paused briefly on their way out to glance in the mirror.

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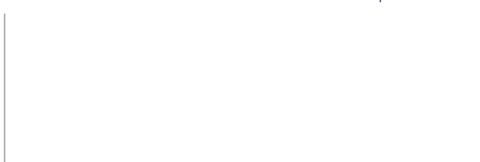
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theater for the Lodge Girl Color War tradition of draping.

A whistle blew. The four tiniest Lodge Girls — two Red, two White — stood onstage in bathing suits and bathing caps, posed like statues, as a handful of their teammates frantically tore newsprint and tape, then papered over them in what looked like a “Project Runway” episode on fast forward. “Hannah and Blum! Hannah and Blum!” cheered Rachel Gersten, 14, invoking the names of the White statuettes. This was Rachel’s fifth summer at Wah-Nee, her fifth Color War. Finally, she was no longer looking up to the Lodge Girls: she was one.

For the Lodge Girls, Red and White were just T-shirt colors. The real divisions, the ones that mattered, were two cliques that had ossified over time, loosely divided by geography: Long Island and Westchester. The groups began to coalesce the summer before sixth grade, when the girls were Comets. They hardened the next summer, as Jets, after a school year filled with exclusive sleepovers and at the outset of bat mitzvah season, with its fraught invitation lists. They persisted through the next, the Fantastics, called Fannies.

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