

Building your Cross Country Program

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Starting a Cross Country Program (From Scratch)

- Survey student body
- Started "running club" for winter sport athletes in the fall as a means of getting fit. Took them to road races. Began discussions with parents of kids attending about the sport of cross country.
- Spoke with coaches at bigger schools in communities within 45 mile radius for meet information, costs, etc...
- Approached administrators (a.d. And principal)
- School Board presentation

The Early Years at Rock Bridge

- I inherited a program that had qualified as a team for the state meet once (boys' program), and only had one all-state runner in the thirty years of the school's existence. The girls' program had never won a cross country meet. The boys had won one meet, a dual.
- Athletes had rarely if ever run in the summer or winter.
- Athletes played ultimate frisbee on the day before races (as recovery).
- Athletes usually ran four days a week and on race weeks, five.
- The team was comprised of 17 individuals.
- The team typically competed on Tuesdays, Fridays, or Saturdays, with each week looking different.
- The team typically competed down a division or two attending meets against schools in classes 1, 2, and 3 on a regular basis.

You have to change the
culture.

Don't Scare them Away!

- Through my encounters, most kids that run cross country have not grown up with the dream of running distance, whereas they've often dreamt of being football, basketball, volleyball, soccer, and baseball players. Somehow, through the social and competitive piece, we need to get them excited about distance running.
- We are very equal parts task and social cohesive. Too much imbalance in one direction or the other tends to take its toll on our performances in practice and on meet days.
- Time trials to establish training groups - making sure they always have SOMEONE to run with.
- Establishing the idea that you will train them as individuals within the concept of team as the central focus.
- Minutes vs. Miles - significance of saying, "Run 30 minutes vs. run....miles."

Social Cohesion

- Training groups - base early season pacing on ability to talk on various runs. Encouraged to do so. Athletes often become very close friends with their training groups.
- Stretching - we take a lap as a team before stretching, which is led by a dynamic routine and followed up with light static stretching which is predominantly used for kids to socialize and reconnect and discuss the day's events. Sometimes I play music during this portion of practice as well.
- If it's a necessary thing, I speak to the team before the lap, and at some point during the light static stretching I begin to talk about the day's workouts. I attempt to set the tone one way or another at those points.
- Wednesday - Active Rest days - on Wednesdays of race weeks, we do not run. We utilize six day weeks taking Wednesdays off, for the exchange of the athletes grouping up on Sundays to get their long runs done at a time that best fits the majority of their group members. We have a goal setting session at some point during our Wednesday practice, as well as a time to call out "props" from our last race. Some of our Wednesdays we have dance contests, cake contests, etc...

Social Cohesion cont...

- Before race day dress up: captains from each team decide on team outfits prior to their racing day. We've had anything from Disney princess day (girls) to Nascar day.
- Pasta Parties - a given in most programs. We do ours the night before a meet. Several team parents team up for the cooking of the meal, held at one team members' home. We have a sign up at our full team meeting the night before the first practice. These often have a waiting list of a year or so to host.
- Summer runs to breakfast. (How I snagged my female 2:09 800 / 4:56 mile runner)
- Summer runs to pools/lakes.
- Bus rides before and after are always encouraged. Rarely do kids NOT ride the bus home.
- Have fun and enjoy being the coach. They need to see us as human, not just their task master.
- Travel. An overnight trip. Nike Regionals, etc...

Task Cohesion

- The kids know when it is time to be serious, when it is time to work, and what is expected.
- It is my job to set the tone for this kind of environment as well. Obviously, if I see an athlete that is feeling overwhelmed, I'll do what I can to create a less stressful situation.
- Our Active Rest Wednesdays are oftentimes meant to be mental focus days. We look at the upcoming meet, who we are racing against as teams and individuals in ALL races. We set team and individual goals and discuss, as a team, expectations.
- Our primary work day during a Saturday race week will be Tuesday, with secondary work coming on an occasional Monday, and / or Thursday. I always let athletes know what kind of workout will be done, remind them to get sleep, eat well, etc...setting up the next day in advance.

Task Cohesion etc...

- Every athlete has their individual and group goals on measured-effort training days. I keep a book that has every practice and workout for the season. Seeing their name in print with goal times next to it is extremely motivating for most. They see I have planned in advance, that they have certain expectations, and usually that is enough to inspire them to work towards their goal. I also keep past seasons' workout books in my possession to help them see their progression which is also very motivating.
- Relaxation/Visualization on the day before also helps set tone for race day.