

Olathe East Cross Country

Fun, Success and Spaghetti:

Building a cross country program
from scratch.

Background on Olathe East

- School of 2000 students
- Suburban Kansas City area
- Area is growing fast (40,000 in 1992; 110,000+ in 2014) and historically supports education.
- We have a large mix of middle class, very upper class and also government sponsored welfare housing.
- Very strong support from community and administration for athletics and extra-curricular activities.
- I think that last one is very key to success, every pulling and pushing each other.
- Stability---We have six head coaches in the building who started their programs in 1992. Forty two state titles overall.

My Background that affected my coaching style

- I wanted to be an athlete as long as I can remember—Johnny Unitas, Freddie Patek...
- Junior High Track Coach—“Quit...you are slower than all the girls”.
- High School—Andy Deckert, Salina South recruits me for cross country...I had no real ability that showed itself, he simply wanted to have good kids. Looked for intelligence and drive.....he could coach the rest.

- Immediately found success.....after training myself to run for a year...
- JV runner, C team runner, Varsity five man, college recruit, alternate, failure, success through “living by the clock” and ultimately national qualifier and coach.
- Think back to my junior high coach....what would I have missed if I had followed his advice?
- There isn't a place on the team that I haven't been. I think it all had a purpose to make me the coach and person I am today.

Why do kids run cross country?

- Jack Daniels research—“the number one reason kids join a team is to have fun.”
- I think it is also to belong to something that has prestige and “an identity”.
- Fun has many definitions. Distance running is really not all that fun!
- You must attract kids, and keep kids, and they must be the right kids.

Olathe East Distance Running Year Round Program

- Our philosophy is that to be an accomplished high school distance runner, you must be active the entire year.
- Improvement in distance running is from steady, year-round stimulation in a hard/easy format. 6 months of 40 mpw running is better than six weeks of 80 mile running, then 4 months off to deal with a stress fracture.
- This does NOT mean that athletes cannot be involved in other sports. In fact, for your younger athletes, multi-sport years are probably better in terms of building a better all around athlete. In high school, athletic talent will often trump training.
- On the other hand, for a distance runner, you have a great opportunity to MAKE YOUR OWN TALENT. You can't control how big you are, or how tall you are. But you can control how tough you are. In distance running, talent that doesn't work, soon means you have no more talent.

Summer Running

- This is the basis for our whole season. Kids that don't run in the summer rarely succeed in our program.
- Spring meetings: All junior highs and high school. We get a temporary roster. All kids get a handbook, and a schedule of summer runs.
- Summer runs are NOT required (KSHSAA rules and school philosophy) but are HIGHLY encouraged.
- We are a no cut program (only cuts are based on attitude. No one wants to run all summer and then not make the team. There is a security factor here for beginning kids). This is your athletes' introduction to distance running! Beginners are delicate things.

Summer Running Part 2

- We begin runs at 6:30 am. This is for safety, attitude, and a feeling of togetherness. If you run with someone all summer, you won't let them down in a meet. All athletes are welcome. We will sometime get athletes from other sports, who will come out a year or two later. We stress responsibility and taking care of others.
- M-Long Run; T-Tempo Run or recovery; W-Fartlek or Hills; Th-Breakfast Run; F-Sa-Su-On your own with at least one rest day, two rest days for beginners.
- Workouts are grouped by ability, experience. We have lots of distances from 1 mile to 6 miles the first day.
- Undertrain beginners. Give them a taste of success early! They can do this! But also give them a taste of the future by seeing the veterans.
- Veterans with little talent but great motivation or leadership abilities are wonderful for leading beginner groups, and stretching down and ab work.
- Our goal in summer is ENDURANCE—the ability to comfortably cover the race distance.

Fall Cross Country

- Cross Country is special because everyone scores, everyone has a time, and everyone counts.
- Low risk accountability for kids. You can measure improvement.
- All races, all teams are equally important!
Time everyone, score everyone.
- Specific Workouts will be in the cross country talk

Fall Cross Country Part 2

- Stress Factors: 1) You are moving from morning to afternoon workouts. (Heat). 2) You are starting school work. Many of the distance kids are diligent students. 3) Extra-curricular activities such as band. 4) Social factors- friendship that have changed, boyfriends, girlfriends, ect.
- The body interprets stress literally. It has the same reaction regardless of physical, mental, or emotional stress. You have to be able to identify and manage stress. You need to be able to keep your kids in a situation to manage stress.
- Workout/Recovery are BOTH part of the system. You must plan recovery as much as you plan the workout. Why does Kingwood HS run 70-80 mpw, but keep kids healthy? Why would that not work at Olathe East?

Fall Cross Country 3

- Schedule: Medium/Tough/Very Tough—repeat.
- Course easy, tough competition.
- Course tough, medium competition.
- Both course and tough competition.
- We repeat this to get ready for our regional and state meet.
- We use meets as part of the workout regime, but don't tell kids this.
- Meets are a kids "time to shine". We don't tend to train through them. Set kids up for success and stress the positive. Meet reviews on Monday....too much emotion on the day of the meet to be objective.

Fall Cross Country 4-Making it Fun

- We look for success where we can find it. In the first years that meant picking one team to beat in the meet (our rival). We could finish 11th in a 12 team meet, but if we beat that team we felt we had accomplished our goal.
- We stressed the JV and freshman races as much as we did the varsity. Time everyone and pay attention to those meets. We now refer to them as “Future Varsity” and “Potential Varsity” races.
- The same thing is expected from all athletes and all teams at the meet: 1) RUN THE RACE TO THE BEST OF YOUR ABILITY THAT ONE DAY; 2) BE A GOOD TEAM-MATE (NO BIG BUNCHES IN THE TENT....CHEER ON YOUR TEAM-MATES; 3) BE CLASSY IN ALL THINGS.

FALL CROSS COUNTRY 5-MAKING IT FUN

- Summer breakfast runs to get to know your team
- The Donut Run
- The Spaghetti Feeds
- Make Fund Raisers fun events-Pizza Shoppe night.
- Year end banquet: Results book, video, senior send-off.
- Parent Support Group: 1) Have clear rules for them. The support, you coach. 2) Giving them tasks and responsibilities fosters a sense of purpose and accomplishment.

Donut Run

- This is a inter-team cross country meet.
- We divide the team into squads of seven runners apiece.
- The seniors get to name the team with coaches approval.
- Each team makes their own uniform.
- We run this as an actual meet, complete with course, starting line, finish chute, place cards, and team scores.
- After the meet, we have parents, runners and alumni eat breakfast together.
- This introduces runners and parents to what they can expect at an actual cross country meet in a fun, low-stress atmosphere.

Spaghetti Feeds

- We feed the entire team on Friday before a meet.
- Parents host the feed on a rotating basis.
- We keep records of food and cost so parents know what to expect.
- Parents volunteer to help with the feed (younger parents due this, then step up the next year to host.)
- Stress politeness and manners to the team.
- A lot of times we will take our shoes off before entering the house.
- Kids “pay for the food” with “hard work at practice.”
- Parent booster motivational gifts.

Some Final Thoughts

- I try to remember that for each kid, they are the most important person in they and their parents lives. Remember that at workouts and meets. Act as if they are your only athlete at the meet.
- Your younger athletes will need more coaching at meets than your older more experienced ones. Create a supportive atmosphere.
- Define nervousness as a positive. It's your body getting ready to perform.
- Just because an athlete CAN do something, it doesn't mean that SHOULD do something.
- Programs reflect their coach. That is a positive. Your program should reflect your personality and be an extension of your teaching philosophy. I'm very much an individual focus guy within a team atmosphere. It took me a long time to figure out how to reflect that through our team.
- If you kids improve, feel good about your program, and feel it was worthwhile to be in it, you have accomplished something very special, regardless of wins and losses. Almost anything can be turned into a positive if you can find it.