

The difference between boys and girls when coaching cross country

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Character and Talent: Boys

- ✗ Hard work is crucial.
- ✗ Talent needed for Elite athletes but not necessarily a great team.
- ✗ Developing young, less talented, runners takes time. Work ethic needed from the beginning. Young male runners who are willing to work hard will overtake those that don't.

Focus energy on boys that have great character and a strong work ethic. Talented boys are not necessarily on the top of my list. Boy championship teams need to have some talent but mostly they are made up of kids that are dedicated and willing to work hard. If you recruit hard working boys you will always have good teams and when the talent rotates through, your teams will compete for a State Title.

Coaching tips for boys

- ✗ Watch your feeder schools for the mid-pack kids that coaches say work hard.
- ✗ Look for interest and energy when you talk with kids about your program.
- ✗ If they say they are soccer players don't put a lot of energy into changing their mind.
- ✗ Don't throw a lot of energy at the "elite" feeder school kids unless you know they carry the correct character traits.

Character and Talent: Girls

- Talent is crucial.
- Work ethic needed to develop talent and create proper atmosphere
- Work ethic can be developed as the female athlete ages.
- Untalented, hardworking, female runners rarely see the growth that their male counterparts do.

Sad to say, talent is needed. As a coach you need to find the talented distance runners and get them to commit. Once they have committed they can be taught the work ethic needed to stay great. Unlike boys, talent is a requirement just to be good. Getting a lot of talent and developing it is needed to win state titles.

Coaching tips for girls

- Focus a lot of energy on talented runners at your feeder schools.
- Unlike the boys, your only competing against volleyball, softball, club soccer, and gymnastics.
- Club soccer is full of hard working, athletic girls that can help your team. Many of them will make the switch to Cross Country if your program is strong enough.
- You must believe that the talent is in your school and you have to find it.

Training Philosophy: Boys

- ✗ Like to be trained as a pack and then looked at as individuals.
- ✗ Competition in practice is mandatory.
- ✗ Harder to break down so you can be more aggressive about finishing workouts.
- ✗ More "accurate" about how they feel during workouts.
- ✗ Nutrition and blood work is not a major concern.

Young boys seem to love the opportunity to compete against each other in practice. They learn best about how to train from other runners on the team. To them, pacing is how fast you have to run to keep up with the next best runner. They flourish in a pack and are capable of training through growth spurts. Hard, aggressive workouts make them better.

Coaching tips for boys

- ✗ Give individual workouts but establish training groups early on.
- ✗ Challenge them in practice using specific times or other runners to motivate.
- ✗ Don't be afraid to crank up the mileage every now and then.
- ✗ Since your boys' team is made up of a bunch of hard workers, they will appreciate a hard-ass coach. If you hurt their feelings, ask them if they would like to train with the nice JV coach for a while.

Training Philosophy: Girls

- Like to be treated as individuals. Training as a pack is very hard to do.
- Competition in practice has to be thought out and planned. For some girls it can never happen.
- Break down easily on harder workouts, but can be developed to handle them.
- Are not always honest about how they feel. Sometimes won't tell you when their hurt.

- Nutrition and blood work is a major issue.

Girls are motivated by individual goals in practice. They do not like competition and would prefer to avoid it.

Remember to focus on the individual first and then the team. They will LOVE the individual attention and it will help build the relationships mentioned later on. If they feel you are interested in them, training and building a team will take place naturally as the runner matures.

Coaching tips for girls

- Individualize workouts. Relate all workouts to time equivalents.
- Inform each girl individually what they are trying to accomplish.
- Force girls to train with different groups to avoid “pecking order”
- Pre-plan competitive practices and make them pace related.
- Let packs develop naturally. DON'T FORCE THEM. Break up packs that are not improvement oriented.
- Carefully monitor their practice performance. ALWAYS favor the side of caution until you really know the runner.
- Require blood tests twice a year for all female runners over 40 miles per week. Urge all others to do so.

Mental Preparation: Boys

- ✗ Like detailed plans but overall course strategies work just fine.
- ✗ Nerves before races tend to cause overexcitement.
- ✗ Rely on the energy of the pack to keep them going in a race and during training.
- ✗ Love experiments, no fear of failure.
- ✗ They can still perform even if the “plan” doesn't work.
- ✗ No fear of success.

To a boy, mental preparation takes place naturally with time and experience. They like to have input and, in many cases, seem to come up with their own plan. Training boys in a pack will help them to develop confidence and work together at practice and in meets. They do not have a fear of failure so they like to experiment and try crazy things. They also have the ability to survive when a plan falls apart.

Coaching tips for boys

- ✗ Pick specific meets and workouts that require similar runners to stay together as a pack so they can learn from each other. Knowledge is power.
- ✗ Allow the team to mentally prepare each other for hard workouts.
- ✗ Simple strategies for the beginning of a race make a big difference.
- ✗ Don't make race plans complicated. Give them two or three simple things to do that they are motivated about and let them go.
- ✗ No visualization, no detailed plans.

Mental Preparation: Girls

- Need a detailed plan to perform.
- Nerves before races cause fear of failure and limits their ability to stay mentally engaged before a race.
- Need to be mentally forced or tricked out of their comfort zone.
- Rely on the energy of the race or a specific partner to keep them going.
- Fear of success limits their ability to mentally prepare for training.

Remember, female runners are emotionally involved. The fear of success and the fear of failure both play huge roles when mentally preparing a girl for a race or workout. Competition is personal. Nerves before races can limit their ability to stay mentally engaged before a race.

Coaching tips for girls

- Get to know your girls individually so that you understand their fears. MPI (Mental preparation inventory).
- Create workouts that strengthen them and help them attack their fears.
- Make race strategies specific and to the point.
- Visualization works.
- When their ready, have them share their fears and goals with the team.

Team Building: Boys

- ✗ Takes place naturally and, with the exception of elite runners, it is a priority.
- ✗ Coaches guide team building but they are not needed.
- ✗ Friendships develop from the team and strengthen the bond.

- ✘ Boys look at their teammates as “partners in battle”. They recognize that their teammates will make them better.
- ✘ No pecking order. No issues when one runner beats another. Their anger is focused on the competitive situation instead of each other.

Remember, we’ve got boys that like to work hard and are excited to accomplish something. Boys create friendships through the team and these friendships strengthen the team. They like to train as a team, plan as a team, and race as a team. When one runner beats another, boys recognize that this will only make the team stronger.

Coaching tips for boys

- ✘ Although team building activities work with boys, you’ll get more out of a night out on the town.
- ✘ Encourage them to hang out together during non-running times.
- ✘ Give them ample opportunity in practice to use each other, beat each other, and learn from each other. Friendships will develop and the team bond will start to take place.

Team Building: Girls

- Does not take place naturally
- Coaches need to be very proactive when building the team and constantly aware of dynamics.
- The team develops from friendships.
- Girls look at teammates as competitors unless they’re friends.
- Pecking order is a major issue. Girl runners are afraid to beat their teammates because they don’t want them to be angry or hurt their feelings.
- Freshmen commonly make the team. This can be an issue on many fronts

Girls create the team through friendships and this can be really hard to do if they don’t like each other. They can establish “pecking orders” so they don’t upset runners who are older. Freshman commonly make the team creating potential problems. When separation occurs between groups of friends rifts will occur within the team and they are not easy to fix. Teammates can become the hidden enemy. Incoming freshman can suffer drastically in a negative team environment. Either they take over a leadership role or they try to just blend in and do not help the team to their fullest.

Coaching tips for girls

- Have an organizational meeting with your incoming seniors in the spring and teach them how to welcome incoming freshmen. Older girl runners have established the importance of the team and they will work hard to keep rifts from occurring.
- Challenge your best seniors to continue the legacy. They NEED to be an integral part of developing younger runners.
- Have numerous team building activities during the summer.
- In any activity, separate friend groups and pair older runners with younger runners.
- Keep your ears open. If you hear about a team get together talk with your captains about who is invited and who is left out.
- Keep your ears open. Any rifts need to be handled immediately

Athlete/Coach Relationship: Boys

- ✘ As long as they are knowledgeable about what you’re doing they’ll buy in aggressively.
- ✘ Even if they do buy in to your approach they can be fickle if things start to go wrong.
- ✘ Prefer honesty even when it might not be what they want to hear.
- ✘ Will respond to a hard-ass approach as long as it’s positive.
- ✘ Prefer to be coached as a team.
- ✘ Like individualism on a friendship level.

Boys want a coach and someone who supports them and can make them better. They will also treat you like you’re one of their teammates and develop a friendship with you over time. They will still count on you as the person in charge of leading them towards success. Boys will examine workouts and coaching when things go wrong. As seniors, elite boys will become your lifelong friend.

Coaching tips for boys

- ✘ Teach them about your workout philosophy. Boys love to know why you do what you do.
- ✘ Coach them first, be friends with them later.
- ✘ As they get older, allow them the ability to change the workout to better suit them and their pack. Let the younger runners see them as the coach.

- ✗ Remember, they want to work hard. They want a coach that will push them and force them to that next level.

Athlete/Coach Relationship: Girls

- Takes forever to get them to buy in but once they do they'll be there for life.
- Want to be told the truth but they want it sugar coated and they need direction on how to fix anything negative.
- Will respond to challenges as long as they are kept at an individual level.
- Over analyze team coaching by looking for positives and negatives where there usually aren't any.
- Really value the one-on-one coaching relationships.

Girls search for a relationship first and then a coach. They will decide if they like you or not. Once they buy in, they emotionally buy in and they'll be yours for life. Decisions are personal to them. They will always over think any decision you make involving them or other runners. They want to be told exactly what to do during workouts and they need you to be supportive to help them through it. They really, really value one-on one instruction.

Coaching tips for girls

- If a girl does not buy in, treat them like a boy because they will still respond to you as a coach and maybe the friendship will develop later on. If they are negative, CUT THEM LOOSE.
- Complement them daily on the simple things that make a difference.
- Only focus on the positives during a workout, talk about the negatives individually.
- Explain you decisions in great detail.

Overall Career Plan: Boys

- ✗ As boys mature they get stronger and faster.
- ✗ Mileage can increase earlier and mileage progression is consistent.
- ✗ Both physical and mental maturity seem to happen together.
- ✗ Hard work makes sub-par runners good and good runners become champions.
- ✗ An overall plan from their freshman through senior year will progress forward creating higher mileage than most girls.

Boys need an overall plan that allows them to improve as they mature. They will get stronger and faster naturally. Very seldom do you see an elite freshman boy. In 17 years I've never had a freshman break 16:30 and I've only had one break 16:40. Boys will develop over time and their 4 year should be consistently aggressive.

Coaching tips for boys

- ✗ Create a 4 year plan for freshman boys that will lead them towards higher mileage as a junior and senior.
- ✗ If physically mature, be aggressive early with this plan.
- ✗ In the event that injury or personal problems interrupt the plan, allow them the time to heal and then work them back so that they are back on their original plan.

Overall Career Plan: Girls

- As girls mature they can get stronger and faster but physical characteristics start to define who they are and their risk for injury.
- Mileage increases are often interrupted.
- They tend to be physically mature, for running purposes, at an earlier age but mentally they need a lot of development.
- Burn out is an issue.
- Girls need to work harder to stay the same.
- Overall plans for girls need to be individualized and they will constantly change. Higher mileage can occur but only with runners whose plan was not interrupted.

As girls mature they can get stronger and faster but physical characteristics start to define who they are and their risk for injury. They tend to be physically mature, for running purposes, at an earlier age but mentally they need a lot of development. Although an overall 4 year plan is nice, most often it is interrupted and it is how you react to this interruption that makes all the difference.

Coaching tips for girls

- Do not be aggressive with freshman and sophomores. TALENT DOES NOT EQUAL ABILITY!! Simple injuries that become chronic could happen at the wrong developmental time and create major setbacks.
- Be prepared to change a 4 year plan as your runners mature.
- When the 4 year plan is interrupted, completely change it with a new starting point.