



THE LONG TERM APPROACH TO COACHING YOUNG DISTANCE RUNNERS

PATIENCE! Ah what a virtue. We all strive to be more patient in our daily lives. Patience with our co-workers, ourselves our spouses and with all those around us. However when we don the sacred mantle of coach and couple this with parental expectations patience quickly gets flushed down the commode. The temptation to focus on short-term results is great. With weekly meets and end of season championship meets coaches often get drug into the euphoria of weekly team results, runners personal bests and rankings. There is no question as a coach that you want to find a way to motivate your kids by showing improvement, keeping parents engaged by their child's success and keeping your team focused towards helping each other. Unfortunately for most distance runners success does not happen overnight and keeping your distance runners sights on the future is much better in the long run than having them and you be too concerned with what happens week to week. Here is what I have come to know in over 26 years of working with young distance runners.

- 45% of your team will not be able to chew gum and walk at the same time every new season you start. Moreover with current obesity rates and the concurrent lack of physical readiness of many Elementary and Middle School students newcomers to your team will not likely be able to complete 400-600m of running without stopping.
- Of the remaining 55% most will not be consistent with their running throughout the year. Some will have participated in other sports throughout the year, which is great. Others may have just turned into couch potatoes. In other words you cannot take for granted that your kids will be ready to tackle a season or even finish the first race when pre-season practice starts.
- Most young runners first experience with running in our society has unfortunately been punitive. Running suicides in Basketball practice. Drop a pass – make a fumble – incomplete a pass > “take a lap”. Penalty laps, extra sprints for being late or missing practice. The list goes on and on. One of the most fundamental human locomotive activities outside of walking has been turned into drudgery by sports coaches near and far. Make any sense to you?
- Solid aerobic development is not something achieved in a summer or fall but something that is built over years of consistent, measured training.
- Young North African distance stars are not overnight sensations. They have grown up in high altitude environments using their legs as the predominant mode of transportation in their daily lives. They have done so at a very early age. By the time they have reached mid to late teens they have cobbled together an aerobic training base that takes most Western runners till their mid twenties to obtain. They are most often not burdened with the luxuries of Western life such as computers, iPads, smartphones, TV's, comfy couches, personal trainers and the Internet.
- One cannot be personally contacted by a college coach until after July 1st of the summer prior to ones senior year in HIGH SCHOOL – they are not looking at elementary and middle school runners! An elementary or middle school champion does not guarantee high school, college or post collegiate success. There is plenty of time to reach for these lofty goals –for now enjoy the ride and hidden benefits that come with being a healthy, well rounded distance runner.
- Local road races are NOT the proper environments to teach young runners the joys of running, much less the rigors of competing against ones peers. Leave your local 5K's to those who run them most often – moms, dads and other adults seeking self-satisfaction and fitness. Most kids do not need to be running road races till their athletic careers are over. Sure one 5K in the summer to see how your summer base training is progressing is fine – but entering your child into numerous local

road races will only lead to the long term demise of their ability to compete against their peers while taking away the fun they might have in later years as adults in entering these events.

- Stop worrying about the clock and the distance of the course in cross-country races. There is no athletics governing body that certifies the distance of a cross-country course – EVEN THE IAAF WORLD CHAMPIONSHIPS! Courses distances are estimates at best. Course difficulty varies greatly from one course to the next thus making judgments about improvement based on time meaningless. Take down the clock in a cross-country race and you can still score the meet. Place of finish is of paramount importance and allows you to make judgments on improvement from race to race more effectively. The clock is only relevant when you get to the track – certified distance, reproducible surface and accurate timing.

Knowing the above to be true I have found it much better to nurture younger runners so that they first and foremost love the activity. Remember, many already are pre-conditioned to think running as both painful and devoid of fun. Running is an activity that can benefit each and every one of your athletes for decades. It may not lead to athletic success and reward but it will set them on path of healthy living that will endure far beyond a tarnished medal or trophy. Each day of running is a small building block placed upon a foundation of your distance running “house” that will take 10-15 years to build. During this 10-15 year period your athlete will undergo profound physical and emotional changes. Just navigating through the changes encountered by most during their adolescent years is daunting at best – throw athletic expectations on top of this and for some it can be too much. Some respond to these physical and emotional changes better and quicker than others. This further underscores the need for patience and balance when dealing with young runners. Give them the proper perspective about their running early (as well as their parents) so that you can better equip them to navigate the changes that lie ahead for them in the years to come.

I have been fortunate to have both of my children “grow up” with running. With two parents who ran competitively in college and after it would have been easy to spoon-feed our kids running to the point of nausea. Yet we took a hands off approach to exposing them to a sport we dearly loved and continue with today 43 years after taking our first running steps. They both ran middle school cross-country with our youngest taking part in the first KYA elementary school cross-country races. They both ran summer track and field, elementary – middle school track and field. They also had separate dreams of playing in the NFL and the NBA. They gradually played their way out of those two sports to come to realize that this running thing might be something they were good at. No pushing – no shoving just an exploration of the sport by dipping their toes in the water and letting them choose. Were there times when running mom and dad could have been sent to “proud parents time out”? – YOU BET!! Yet through it all we wanted them to enjoy their running, knowing that there were benefits they could enjoy long after the crowds had disappeared and individual – team honors faded into obscurity. How has this approach worked out? Well the verdict is not in yet and only time will tell – so far so good. ***I say all this to save both coaches and parents sleepless nights worrying about things that in the end amount to little when looking at the long road that is the life of a distance runner.***

Youngest Son

Elementary School Cross Country Runner

Elementary School 800 Champion

Middle School Cross Country Runner – Top 10 at Area Championships

Middle School Track Champion 800

Member of High School State Cross Country Championship Team

Running in College – ETSU

Oldest Son

Elementary 800 Champion

2X Middle School Area Cross Country Champion

3X Middle School 1600 Champion

High School State Cross Country Champion

Footlocker National Cross Country Finalist
Running in College – NC State
All- ACC Track and Cross Country
2X NCAA All-Region Cross Country
3X NCAA Cross Country National Finalist
13:59 – 5K PR Track

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