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The philosophy and technique in running cross country

By Jon Kingdon

Acalanes head coach Jeff Hutson, an ultramarathoner himself, describes the demands of running cross country succinctly: "I think that cross country is the hardest sport out there with the insane amount of endurance that it takes and the mental commitment. These runners are warriors."

Alan Sillitoe, the author of "The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner," has never been witness to the Lamorinda cross country teams. At Miramonte, says head coach Brian Henderson: "It's like a family with the boys and girls working together from the freshmen to the seniors. We train as if we're one big unit. Many of the first-time runners get hooked on the comradery. There are some dropouts but we have done well with re-

taining the runners. If you put in the work, you will improve and that's kind of a cool draw."

Campolindo head coach Chuck Woolridge has everyone practicing together: "We will divide up the training groups based on their performance as well as the number of years they've been running but essentially everyone is doing the same training."

There is much more to cross country than just running various distances. For Miramonte's Brian Henderson it's understanding the whole body: "We do drills at the beginning of practice to work on the phases of their running form – the arm swing, the foot placement or bringing your heels up higher to get a full range of motion."

Hutson brought over Joe Escobar from the team's

track team: "Joe's a magician with respect to form and he has been a great addition. He helps with form and strength work. Between all of us we will work on their arms, legs, hips and shoulders. Between all of us, we can go on to get everyone running properly."

Woolridge wants to get his players in the right positions to be economical: "It really has to do with functional strength and developing the strength the athletes need to hold their bodies in the right positions to be economical. Everybody's geometry is different and everyone comes in with their strengths and weaknesses. Some kids have really strong glutes and hip flexors and other kids don't and so we identify where kids need work and we address that stuff."

The mental aspect is an

area that is not overlooked. Woolridge confronts it head on: "We do sessions on sports psychology and talk a lot about attitude and trying to bring our runners into the present moment whether it's in a workout or in a race, getting rid of distractions. We deal with the things we can control and letting go of the things we can't."

To Henderson, "hitting the wall" is the hardest part of the sport: "A runner can find themselves in a middle mile and gotten gassed and that is where things can play in their head. It can be a big mental challenge. We work on that, talking about race strategies as to what point in the race they are and how to handle things like feeling you're getting too tight. Sometimes, the runner has to figure these things out for themselves and how to run early and late in the race."

The mental aspect for Hutson "is my bread and butter. I'm very careful that they keep their heads in the game. I run with them and when you hear the heavy breathing, you give them anecdotal things to get their minds right. There is a lot of feeling of accomplishments in cross country and we give them a lot of encouragement. The kids really appreciate their improvement. I don't care how they run today and tomorrow. I just want them to love running so 25 years from now when they can't play team sports, they will be able to run. It's a fantastic way to stay fit and healthy and get in a great community of people and I for one have lived that for 20 years. I really want them to know that they can do this and how it has affected me and gotten me through the tough times in my life."

Lamorinda Cross Country

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Woolridge feels good about the depth of the team: "We come back with four athletes that returned to us that were on the varsity last year and we feel we're in pretty good shape. We also have a freshman runner, Alex Lodewick, who ran for the Diablo Valley Track and Field Club. He has shown promise and has been working out with the varsity team. We're being conservative but we expect to have him running with the varsity."

Senior leadership is crucial to the team but four-year runners, Dylan Cronin and Sam Morasch have really stepped up, according to Woolridge: "Dylan and Sam bring a ton of experience to the team. They have been around championship athletes and teams. They're passionate about continuing the legacy of the team and they take it very seriously."

Miramonte

Miramonte head coach Brian Henderson is taken with

his team's attitude and performance so far: "The vibe of the team this year is pretty good. We're improving our commitment level and our performance has improved a ton. After the first meet, we had a number of kids that improved from 15 to 30 seconds in a two-mile race."

Junior Audrey Allen, who only began running as a freshman, is the team's top runner, says Henderson: "Audrey has improved tremendously and has become one of the top distance runners in the area. She won the Ed Sias Invitational, which was hosted by Campolindo. She won the small school varsity race and our team won the invitational."

Two sophomores, Kate Riley and Claire Nolet, are the next two ranked runners on the team.

The three captains are Riley, Allen and senior Athena Davis. "They make sure that the kids are taking seriously at the right time," says Henderson. "It's very important to have

those kinds of kids so that coaches aren't the only ones spreading the message. They set the tone and that's why the vibe for the team is better this year than last, and last year's was better than the one before that because that leadership has grown over the last few years."

On the boys side, co-captain Freddie Bell is the number one runner on the team followed by junior Ryan Gottschalk. Following these two, it's still unsettled as to who will be running in the meets, says Henderson: "We have a number of young talented guys that are pushing the upperclassmen and trying to find their way into the top group. Simon Neuwirth-Stein, a newcomer has been showing a lot of promise."

Besides Bell, Henderson has been relying on senior Matthew O'Brien and junior Alex Meckes to help in the team's leadership: "Matthew is the spirit leader that gets everybody jazzed up and Alexis very good about communicating, leading and taking charge."

Acalanes

As an ultra-marathoner, when Acalanes co-head coach Jeff Hutson (along with Ed Basaldua) speaks on running, he knows of whence he speaks. "Campolindo and Miramonte have had a lot more continuity than we've had. When I started, I was an assistant coach and became co-head coach last year with Ed. I like where we are right now in comparison with the last couple of years. We have some great continuity. The kids are big on collaborating and supporting one another and it is really neat chemistry this year and it makes our job a lot easier. For the first time in a long time, we have a lot of depth. I'm very optimistic with the depth of the team."

Junior Nicole Frigon is the Don's leading runner. Sophomore Lauren Yee has also been very impressive and will be running with the varsity. "With 28 girls on the roster we have a number of girls that will have the opportunity to run with the varsity. We're starting to show

some depth which is nice and we have some freshmen that will be really good next year."

Sophomores Katrina Ortman and Aysha Craig have both shown great form. Frigon, Yee and Lena Johnson and Taylor are the leaders on the team and the overall team is one that Hutson very much appreciates: "The girls are fantastic. They are delightful to coach as they have such positive attitudes and love for each other."

Junior Sam Roth is the team's leading runner followed by seniors Andrew Owens, Nick Hutson and junior Dom Basaldua with a number of runners competing to fill out the roster for the matches. Co-captain Rayce Walton and sophomore Loic Windfuhr-Durand and freshmen Tyler Hunt and Bennett Dodge are leading candidates to fill those positions but, says Hutson, "We have a lot of freshman and sophomores that will be running with the varsity."

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