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

Campolido 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."

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