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Get Me to the Meet on Time: Challenges of High School Coaching

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Abstract

In order to achieve success, there is little doubt that sport coaches must overcome a plethora of challenges beyond simply designing and implementing effective training schedules and competition strategies. The United States high school interscholastic sports environment is no different. The purpose of this short essay is to provide a personal coaching narrative from a United States high school boys and girls cross country coach as he discusses the challenges confronted in overcoming administrative obstacles to successfully prepare his student-athletes for competition. In particular, this paper chronicles how the coach successfully negotiated the political landscape of having his team being permitted to be dismissed from school in adequate time to arrive at away weekday cross country meets in order to adequately warm-up and prepare for competition. Oftentimes, these coaching stories exist, but are rarely recorded. It is the hope of the author that other coaches in similar situations may glean ideas on how to best handle these situations within their own programs. This essay may be of interest to all coaches, but high school coaches in particular, as many of whom may be able to relate to the administrative issues that have to be negotiated for a sport program to thrive. Moreover, further commentary and discussion on this topic is invited.

Keywords: *interscholastic athletics, cross country, running, pre-performance routines, warm-up*

Introduction

My first head cross country coaching position was also the inaugural year that cross country was made a varsity sport at that high school. Cross country had been a club sport for the two previous seasons. Making it an “official” varsity sport was a great step in a positive direction for the program, but because the sport was new and unfamiliar to administrators there were several obstacles to clear. One of the biggest of these was in convincing administrators that school dismissal times for our away weekday cross country meets were not adequate.

Three weeks of meets passed where the team would regularly arrive with only a few minutes to spare before the first race. After another meet in which our team arrived just before the gun, my team and I had had enough. Upon arriving home late that evening, I stayed up until the wee hours writing a letter to district administrators describing the frustration we were experiencing. I felt like

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Jerry Maguire (Crow, 1996), writing his moral epiphany mission statement. Hopefully, any coach in a similar position may derive something beneficial from my experience. The major themes of this nocturnal plea on behalf of my runners are described below.

Dismissal Time is Different from Departure Time

My team was rarely dismissed before the start of an “advisory” study hall period at 2:35 p.m. for weekday meets, regardless of the distance we needed to travel to the meet. When calculating the time it takes to travel to meets, the 10 to 15 minute cushion for the team to change into uniforms before leaving was not always taken into account. After the team hurriedly changed, we typically departed the school at 2:45 p.m. If we needed to travel an hour to a meet, which typically started at 4:00 p.m., that left us only 15 minutes to get ready before the first race. Knowing time would be tight, I would remind the team to put on uniforms under their clothing during their lunch period or in-between classes near the end of the school day. However, it only takes one runner to forget to change for the whole team to have to wait. Furthermore, encountering busy traffic or getting lost when trying to find a rural cross country course only exacerbated the problem.

Academics versus Athletics

The administration stressed how academics always take precedence over athletics and that was why dismissal times should not interfere with class time. I questioned whether academic skills are so much more important than physical skills. One does not need to look further than the growing epidemic of overweight children and childhood obesity to see that priorities are quite lopsided in the United States educational system. What was the name of that legislation – “No Child Left without a Big Behind”?

To that end, I expressed these views in writing my response to the administration: According to the student handbook, the school’s mission was “to provide a quality educational program that encourages educational excellence in a safe environment...This program will provide opportunities to help students strengthen their academic, social, emotional, and physical skills...” Congruent with the district mission statement and the humanistic philosophy, I believe in a holistic educational approach in which the aim is not to produce just intellectuals, but thinking, feeling people who can continue the process of self-education in all areas of their lives (Rogers, 1980). As a health and physical educator, my career choice substantiates this philosophy. Education should not just be a one-dimensional academic approach. Growth and learning in the physical, social, and emotional domains are every bit as important as in the mental realm. We lead richer, fuller lives when we have the health and stamina for enablement. My ultimate goal as a cross country coach is to nurture a joy for running so that my athletes will continue this activity throughout their lives.

Start Times

In my region, cross country was one of the few sports in which competitions started at 4:00 p.m. instead of 4:30 p.m. or later in the evening. This is not a sport which can be played “under the lights” after dark. It is different from other varsity sports in this respect. Logic reveals that we should leave earlier than those sports with later start times. Some administrators may feel that dismissing cross country teams earlier would show favoritism, but the early competition times of meets may necessitate earlier departure times from school compared to other sports.

Bathroom and Race Packets

After arrival at the meet, the coach’s first job is to retrieve the team’s race packet; which includes race numbers, safety pins, schedule of races, course maps, etc. At the same time, all of the

athletes who have been drinking water during the bus ride must rush to the bathrooms. I usually hand out the race numbers and safety pins to the team captains to disperse amongst the team. It can take as long as 10 minutes just to figure out a typical cross country course map. I showed an administrator an example of one of the meet's course maps we were given. It had arrows, dashes, solid lines, stick trees, shrubs, lakes, roads, a hill labeled "The Equalizer", bathrooms, etc. I turned it around in all four directions. All I wanted to figure out was where the stinking start and finish lines were. The smudge marks (or it could have been another bunch of trees) indicated that it had been faxed and photocopied so many times, I think it dated back to the 1970's when the course was originally created!

Previewing the Course

Cross country is like few sports because each competition venue is so dramatically different. In sports such as basketball and volleyball, court measurements and playing surfaces are standardized. Cross country courses vary in length, surfaces, turns, etc. This necessitates walking/jogging the course prior to competition and can take 20 to 45 minutes, depending on how fast one walks/jogs and the number of repeated loops within the course. Previewing the course aids a runner in pacing as well as developing strategies of exactly where and how to run certain parts of the course (i.e. around puddles, over undulating terrain, etc.) and are dependent on race day conditions. This is even more important if you have an athlete who is talented enough to lead the race, as I did. That athlete needs to know where he or she is headed and which turns to make. Additionally, by becoming familiar with the course, each runner will have more confidence in racing and pacing strategy.

Pre-race Routines: Warming Up and Stretching

Arriving at cross country meets without ample time of approximately an hour to view the course, warm-up, and prepare for the race also increases risk of injury and implies to the athletes that a proper warm-up is not important. This also puts runners at a competitive disadvantage. For instance, at an invitational, one of my top female runners rushed to the starting line with tight calves (a problem she had experienced before) due to insufficient time to warm-up and loosen them. After the mid-point of the race, her calves tightened and she slowed considerably. I am certain that if she had had sufficient time to warm-up and stretch before the race she would have performed better and reduced the chance of tightness of her calves.

Many coaches work with their teams to create pre-race routines including running, stretching, and dynamic exercises to prepare their bodies for the upcoming hard exertion and to provide runners something to focus on to reduce anxieties. Pre-race routines prepare athletes mentally and physically for the pending race. Arriving at meets without sufficient time to do these routines can certainly diminish running performance and increase chance of physical injury.

Final Thoughts

Most high school athletic programs promote pride in competing and performing at the highest levels. Not providing ample time to prepare for cross country meets demeans the program and places the school at a disadvantage before races even begin. The student-athletes are certainly aware when insufficient time is given to prepare for competition. I ask the following questions: Why give competitors a decided advantage in this manner? What kind of message do we send to student-athletes when sufficient time is not provided? Is it fair to hamper their best efforts and increase their chance of injuries? Why should any school district be satisfied with promoting mediocrity in athletics? It is understood that preparation is key in any worthwhile endeavor; I believe that this is particularly true in cross country and all sports.

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Postscript

I received a positive response from the administrators and they did loosen up on dismissal times – particularly when they realized it was a safety factor, not just a competitive edge. The following season I also reduced the total number of meets on the schedule – decreasing the number of weekday meets and adding more Saturday meets when dismissal times do not affect missing class.

Author's Note

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