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TRAINING FOR CROSS COUNTRY

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Every sport and athletic event demands that you be able to do certain things to be successful. When you identify those things, you have a menu of things your training should address.

That said, what are the things that competitive open-level Cross Country running demands you be able to do to be successful?

1) If you are a woman, you must be able to “run” a distance of 5-6 kilometers (3.1-3.75 miles). If you are a man, you must be able to “run” 8-10 kilometers (5-6.25 miles).

2) If you are a woman, you have to be able to “race” 5-6 kilometers over hill and dale at a pace of about 5:20-30 per mile. If you are a man, you have to be able to “race” 8-10 kilometers at about 5:00 mile pace.

While #1 and #2 might seem to summarize the challenge of running cross country at an elite level, they, in fact, fall far short of identifying the totality of the challenge—which continues with....

3) You must be able to run anaerobically early in the race.

Anaerobic running will occur as soon as the first uphill is encountered in the race. This is the biggest difference between running cross country and running similar distances on the track. 5000 meter/10,000 meter track races typically see only the final 10-20% of the race being run above aerobic threshold pace. In cross country, one will often encounter the first uphill during the first kilometer of the race.

4) You must be able to respond to pace-breaks throughout the race.

In a cross country race, breaks in steady pace running will occur when running uphill, downhill, sidehill, around tight turns, and when negotiating changes in surface: tall, short, or wet grass... hard-packed or soft, loose dirt... pavement... mud... frozen ground, etc.. Pace breaks will also occur when a pack of runners funnels into a narrowing of the course. In every instance, you must be able to return to race pace quickly after a pace-break.

5) You must be able to race as part of a team.

Cross Country is the quintessential TEAM SPORT. Each runner scores the same number of points as his or her finish place. The composite of a team's first 5 places in the race is its score. The low score wins. In a large, multi-team race, the way the numbers crunch is that the first team to have its 5th runner finish—regardless of the places of its 1st through 4th finishers—almost always wins. This places a premium on team depth and—unlike most other sports—a team's #4 and #5 finishers. Even a team's #6 and #7 non-scoring runners can affect the scoring of a cross country race by finishing ahead of other teams' 1-5 runners, thereby increasing their opponents' team scores. This makes maintaining “contact” with one's teammates during the race absolutely critical. “Contact” is the finite distance at which a runner behind is connected to a runner ahead with invisible strands that pulls him or her along at the same pace. It is always easier to stay-up than it is to catch-up. Once contact is lost, trailing runners often fall quickly off the pace.

So what do these “Must Do's” tell us about how we need to train for Cross Country?

- After acquiring the endurance necessary to run cross country racing distances with ease, the question should become: *What do we accomplish by making **long, slow distance runs** the focus of our training?* Answer: *Not much.* While all distance runners need a steady diet of long runs in their training regime, 70+ miles a week of sub-threshold pace running contributes very little towards being able to do the things that cross country racing demands one do to be successful.

- **Repetition training at 5K/8K goal race pace** must be done early and often throughout the season. This should entail doing large numbers of shorter bouts of running at goal pace early in the season... progressing to smaller numbers of longer reps at goal pace later in the season.
- Some **interval training** must be done throughout the season to acquire the “resiliency” needed to recover from anaerobic running early in the race created by the design and terrain of most cross country courses. The “interval” in a workout is the recovery period between bouts of running. In repetition training, you defeat the purpose of the workout if the recovery period is not sufficient to run repeatedly at the desired pace. In interval training, however, the objective is to experience repeated bouts of anaerobic, high lactate distress. This is accomplished by not allowing for sufficient recovery between repetitions. This can also be achieved by injecting hill reps or hill loops into a repetition workout, or by doing “bunches” of short bouts of fast running with very short recovery periods—and inserting intervals that allow recovery between those bunches.
- **Broken tempo training** must be done frequently to be able to respond to the many pace-breaks in a cross country race. This can be accomplished by doing speed-play runs or surging runs. **Speed-play** (the literal translation of the Swedish word “fartlek”) is a continuous run that employs multiple increases in pace over multiple distances—both short and long—throughout the run. Slow recovery running is done after each burst of fast running and every burst is “fast” relative to its distance and duration. **Surging runs** are also continuous runs. However the base pace of the run is steady—much faster than jogging—and surges are longer, less dramatic increases in pace than what is employed in speed play. The challenge of surging runs is not slowing below steady pace after a surge.
- **To race effectively as part of a “team”, the team must train together.** That means training in one or more groups that attempt to run as a “pack” with everyone maintaining contact with one another... whether it be a long run, repetition or interval workout, speed-play or surging run.

Combining all these “Must Do” elements into a training program that observes the principles of progression, integration, recovery, and specificity is the “art” of training and coaching cross country runners.

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Skip Stolley is the Director of the VS ATHLETICS Track Club and coaches its middle and long distance runners. He has coached 24 Olympic Trials qualifiers, more than 50 qualifiers for the USA Championships, and cross country teams that have placed among the top-3 at the USA Championships six times and won national titles in 1994 and '97. He holds executive committee positions within both USA Track & Field and the U.S. Track Coaches Association and has been selected as a coach for five USA National Teams. In 1999, he was recognized by USA Track & Field as Cross Country Coach-of-the-Year. In 2000, he received USA Track & Field's Outstanding Contributor award.