

The Tamworth Spartans

Images by John McFarlane

Focus on development

Training younger athletes can be a challenging task. Add in the extra dimension of being located in country Australia and you have several additional fences to jump. Mike Cashman has been involved with distance running and coaching younger athletes for 30 years. R4YL asked Mike to share his experiences with the 'Tamworth Spartans', a group of young distance runner in country NSW.

Who currently makes up the Tamworth Spartans?

The present Spartans comprise Ben Ballantine (15 years), Steven Ballantine (14 years, cousin to Ben), Kathryn Nielson (12 years) and Aaron Nielson (10 years, brother to Kathryn). Numbers have fluctuated over the 6 years of the current groups existence, reaching a high of 13 members in 2004.

Why the name "Spartans"?

The name Spartans is taken from the Ancient Greek civilisation where the young members of the society underwent great personal sacrifice and deprivation as part of their military training, emphasising a single mindedness and bravery in pursuit of their goals – one of the underlying philosophies of the Tamworth Spartans culture.

What are the main events that your runners focus on?

Tamworth Spartans set and review their own individual short, medium and long-term goals at the start of each calendar year. The programs tend to be shaped around school-based competition at the school-zone-regional-state-national levels. The cross-country season tends to overlap the Schools athletics season with the same hierarchical levels and focussing on 800m for primary and 800m-1500m-3000m for secondary. Interspersed with these school-based events is participation in a number of Fun Runs to add variety and provide competition and development opportunities. As an example, in 2004, the Spartans participated in 15 separate Fun Runs throughout Northern NSW and Sydney/Newcastle.

Do you find it difficult being located in a country town a long distance from the State capital?

Being located in Tamworth, access to competition is certainly a problem, particularly attempting to gain race fitness leading into major events. Also the lack of a synthetic track surface in Tamworth can be a problem (although a lesser problem) during the build up to State Athletic events. A further complication is that all of the current Spartans group live in rural areas outside of Tamworth (at least 30 minutes drive away) which places a considerable imposition on parents.

The team!

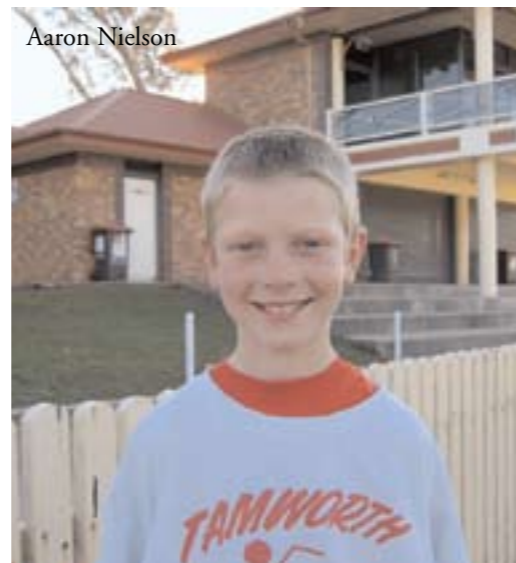


How long have you been working with junior athletes, or involved in running as a coach/team manager?

My involvement in coaching junior athletes goes back virtually to the start of my school teaching career (1964). Over the years, my specialisation became distance running and now it is my exclusive focus. I've been involved as a zone/regional Schools Cross Country convener for around 20 years, and likewise as a Team Manager at the various levels.

I served as the coach of the Tamworth Athletics Club from 1966 until 1975 and the first Spartans (an independent more elite group) commenced in that period with the emphasis then more on the balance between sprinting and distance running. The current group are in fact "Spartans III", as I have had breaks of some years between each group. The current Spartans

Aaron Nielson



are an independent non-affiliated training group.

What would you stress as the most important thing for working with younger athletes?

Obviously working hard and consistently to achieve your goals and believing in yourself. We all need to learn how to bounce back from setbacks and to learn from our mistakes. I spend a lot of time talking about goal-setting and teaching mental rehearsal techniques.

Variety is very important in working with younger athletes and I try to employ various training methods and locations. The social interaction in the group is also a big thing and I use strategies to encourage everyone to be supportive of one another.

What do you find is the most difficult part of working with younger athletes?

The disappointment of losing members of the group, especially after they have worked so hard, improved so much, and achieved many of their short and medium term goals, is very difficult. Peer pressure

Ben Ballantine



and the considerable drawing power of the multitude of other sports, is a constant magnet drawing many athletes away from distance running, but in doing so, those that walk away are doing what they really prefer to do, which is paramount for long-term success.

When Spartans develop high levels of cardiovascular fitness, they also tend to become 'stars' in their associated sports, to the extent where they may eventually choose the latter as their main sporting priority, a strange Catch 22.

The fragility of children's health is often a difficult factor, with asthma management being a significant problem with many junior distance runners. Parental involvement can occasionally have a

negative contribution, hence my insistence on "one coach" as one of my three Spartan membership criteria, along with "Running First" and "Equal Commitment" (i.e. between coach and athletes).

You have a running background, can you give us some details? When did you start running? What has been your two most rewarding experiences related to running?

My first involvement with running as a sport was with the Myer Park Athletics club in Newcastle Athletics Association. Most of my best friends at High School were athletes and I would have been competing from around 13 years of age.

I've now competed in 22 City to Surf events, starting with the second one (1972) and now of course it is an annual pilgrimage. At age 60 (last year), I still managed a time of 67:51, which I was quite happy with as it was my best time for the last 5 years. I got into marathon running back in my 40's, completing half a dozen with a best time of 3:00.57 at age 44.

Getting the Tamworth Ten Fun Run off the ground and organising it for the first two years back in 1974-75 is probably my most rewarding running related experience. Believed to be the 4th Fun Run to start in NSW, we had over 900 finishers in the first year and over 1100 in the second. Thankfully the event is still going and this year I find myself back on the organising committee.

You distribute a Spartans newsletter with a variety of point-scores. How long would you spend preparing these detailed point scores and how often do you put out the newsletter?

Last year I published 18 regular Spartans Newsletters, which varied from 1 page to 7 pages. The athletes have their Spartans Scrapbooks in which they store these Newsletters and other printed materials – cuttings on local/international distance running etc. In each Newsletter there is an update of the Spartans Super-Comp point-score, in which points are allocated for attendance, training awards, return of forms, circuit exercise completion, etc. This is time consuming, but very important in keeping everyone informed, expanding horizons and developing the Spartans Culture.

Some other Spartans 'Innovations' have included: 5 days training camp at Kaputar National Park; team BBQ's; after training social sports – tennis, Ten Pin, touch; bushwalks; paper quiz's, guessing competitions etc; and annual presentation night.

Kathryn Nielson



What are the goals for the future direction of the group?

A major priority is to rebuild membership as it's been my experience that Spartans work best with a good mix for social interaction and training combination options, relays etc. The major goal is a lifelong commitment to an enjoyment of running. Helping Spartans achieve their short, medium and long term goals and developing self-sufficiency is a means towards this end.

Developing a real interest in distance running on the National and International scene is also a desirable goal. Promotion of role models is "hard yakka" given the poor media coverage and national profile of distance running in Australia (Something R4YL is trying to tackle head on).

Steven Ballantine

