

TIPS TO COACHING TEENS

by Sean Williams*

Personal success in running (or any sport) requires determination and dedication, but can providing a rewarding and worthwhile experience for teenagers. The lifestyle of teenagers is not necessarily conducive to the rigors of distance running training which can make coaching teenagers a complicated practice. In the following article Sean Williams provides us with some of his "Tips to Coaching Teens".

Tip # 1: Make It Fun

Cyndi Lauper's hit single from the 80s, "Girls just wanna have fun" also applies to boys. Teenagers will be far more likely to do something for an extended period of time if they enjoy themselves. What is fun for one teen may not be fun for another, so a healthy variety of activities are essential to keep them amused. I include a wide variety of training methods, including strength work using a variety of methods, form drills, stretching, training camps, running training at a variety of locations over many different courses, and training paces at various tempos. I never allow one type of training to dominate over the others.

Tip # 2: The Social Benefits

Far more than just the pure training sessions make up the ingredients of a fun training system. A varied racing program helps give direction and a sense of purpose to all the training. Having a large squad full of teenagers means that they can always rock up to a session knowing that their mates will be there - plenty of others to have a chat, laugh and to share the pain with. Now approaching 40, some of my closest friends, two decades down the track, were members of my coach June Ferguson's squad (June coached Olympic Gold medallists Betty Cuthbert and Maureen Caird, plus Darren Clark, amongst others, over a long coaching career) that I was a member of as a youngster. It is amazing how many social outings, dates, boyfriends/girlfriends result from belonging to a sporting group such as a running club. Parents can take comfort in the fact that it is a healthy pursuit where the kids involved are far less likely to get caught up in drugs and alcohol, plus they are generally kids who are self-driven and have bright academic/career futures.

Tip # 3: The Racing & Team Approach

Runners train to race, so a racing program in both the summer and winter is essential. The "next race on the calendar" is often a talking point amongst the runners. There is always the

chance of another p.b. or another opponent to beat, such as the "arch-rival" that most of us have. Kids love winning medals, trophies, gift vouchers, etc. Making teams, a school, zone, district, state or national team, also thrills them.

Having teens compete for such teams gives an added dimension to their sport. There is nothing quite like that adrenalin rush of holding a baton knowing that you are carrying not only your own success and dreams on your shoulders, but that of your mates. Wearing a common uniform gives team members an identity, a feeling of belonging. Travelling with a team is one of the most enjoyable aspects of any sport. Simply traveling in several carloads out to the local track competition and meeting in the stand as a squad or club is fantastic. More complex journeys, such as bus trips to cross-country and track races and staying overnight, add an extra dimension to the enjoyment. Throw in a flight to an interstate or overseas race(s) and traveling as a team takes on an even more significant meaning. Everything from rooming with a fellow runner, to race preparation, recovery, sharing meals and even sightseeing make the whole racing experience more special when doing it as a group.



Damon Harris

Tip # 4: Have Good Role Models At Your Fingertips

Everyone requires good role models. I strongly believe that, as a coach, I am first and foremost a role model to my runners. Whilst I am still physically able to train with the teenagers, I will. I don't jump into every session but I make a point of running with the squad at least 3 times a week. By actually running beside or directly behind an athlete, a coach receives immediate feedback on their stress levels and form, plus can give verbal advice on the spot. I usually observe runners from the sidelines during sessions involving a large group, such as fartlek, long reps and track workouts. In these situations I time them, make form corrections and give a variety of feedback.

I am not as competitive as I used to be, as more of my time and energy is focused on coaching, but I certainly enjoy busting my guts in front of, alongside, or behind (this is become more often the case these days) the kids. I love Percy Cerutti's philosophy of his runners being "stotan" - a combination of being stoic and Spartan in one's approach. Having a no fear approach to training and racing, running bare-foot, training in all conditions, embracing the pain, doing strength sessions outdoors with the elements instead of in an air-conditioned gym with padded equipment. This sort of approach to world-class distance running has been around since Percy's day and continues up to this day with the great Africans.

I recommend to any coach of juniors to try to integrate seniors with your squad. My squad has always welcomed excellent senior runners and has included regular members such as Tess Bell, Liz Miller, Paul Arthur, Damon Harris, Jeremy Horne, and Liz Yelling. The single-minded determination and work ethic of senior athletes can flow through the squad, making a lasting impression on receptive teenagers.

Tip # 5: Include Regular Training Camps

I like to conduct at least 4 training camps for juniors throughout the year. They are usually held during the school holidays and are often integrated with senior running camps. The camps are held in natural environments such as national parks and virtually all of the training is done outdoors. The major positive of teens attending training camps is that they become immersed in the running culture. They eat and rest with runners, reflect on their running, attend lectures and discussion groups but above all they learn what it is like to focus on training hard for a block. The "effort/recovery" principle is

practiced. The athletes have an easy block before and after the camp, but for a 4-10 day period (depending on the camp), they will train hard.

A training camp is basically the perfect holiday for those who pursue excellence with pride, courage and the ability to endure. As a mother who attended our last training camp commented, "this camp reaffirmed my belief in the value of sport for kids and the invaluable bonds that can form between a coach and a team of runners".

Training camps embody the type of lifestyle and mentality that I try to convince the teens to embrace every day of their lives. If they work hard, they will get the results. They are like a mini-version of year-round training with the squad.

Tip # 6: Build A Base

When devising training programs for teenage middle and long distance runners, it is crucial to build a base to facilitate both short and long-term outcomes. Long-term outcomes should be paramount in any coach's plan. For an individual to achieve success in the junior ranks is by no means a free ticket to success in the senior ranks. I see the teenage years as the ideal opportunity for athletes to build up an enormous base by employing appropriate stress levels of the aerobic and anaerobic systems.

True success as a senior international will only come through years of consistent training. Two or three years of intense training may gain short-term success at the junior level. However, by incorporating too much intense, anaerobic work into training at a young age, the stress levels are such that an athlete is at extreme risk of breaking down with regular illness and or injury. The likelihood of the athlete becoming mentally "burned out" before they reach the age of 20 is also very high. Seven to ten years of moderate training, where the athlete can gradually adapt to increases in both aerobic and anaerobic workouts, have proven to be far more effective in the modern history of running.

Short-term outcomes may not be as vital as the long-term outcomes, but they are important stepping-stones on the path to success for youngsters. Short-term success works wonders for teenagers' levels of motivation and confidence. An annual training plan for teens should be periodised, so that it includes a base period, pre-competition and competition periods.

For my athletes, I make the base period as long as possible and place the greatest emphasis on aerobic conditioning. Much of the running (about 70%) will be performed below the anaerobic threshold at a comfortable pace. A smaller proportion of the running in the base period



(about 25%) will be done at, or close to, lactate threshold. The remaining 5% is "pure speed" training, such as accelerations and sprinting at or close to 100%, all over short distances of between 20m and 100m.

Athletes in the early teens, I start on about 20km per week and gradually build them up to over 100km per week by 18 years of age. It is a very gradual process and takes time. Using this concept you are building a base for the year, as well as a base for their career.

Tip # 7: Remember The Need For Speed

Note that I have included both lactate threshold sessions and pure speed sessions in the base period. These types of sessions continue in both the pre-competition and competition periods, depending on the distance the athlete is targeting. The other component of training, anaerobic training, is introduced in the pre-competition period and continued into the competition period, to varying degrees.

The pure speed sessions are best done year-round, as a younger runner can easily lose their raw speed forever if they don't use it regularly. The old phrase, "if you don't use it, you lose it" is most relevant in this instance.

Speed drills are given to the young runners year-round. Drills include high knee skipping and running, butt kicks and lower leg extensions with low and high knees.

The lactate threshold paced running is best run "under control". After a 15 year-old girl completes a 4km tempo run, for e.g., she should feel strong enough to complete a 2-3km cool-down. She should also feel strong enough to complete another solid session the following day. Too many young athletes are regularly given training sessions that are so tough that they are unable to train at a decent level the next day, or even for up to one week.

Fartlek is a fun, versatile type of training that can incorporate speed in a session that young athletes really enjoy. They can generally complete

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the session at an intensity appropriate to how they are feeling on any given day. I usually like to give fartlek sessions as "lactate bounce" sessions, where runners may go just over their lactate threshold on their hard efforts, then float at a relatively quick recovery pace so that they dip just below their lactate threshold levels.

Anaerobic sessions are very hard on young bodies and should only be given in small doses over short periods of time. The best two forms of anaerobic training are hard racing itself and hill training- particularly sandhill training. The beauty of hill running is that there is minimal impact and that it gives an anaerobic workout and strength training all in the same session. This principle applies tenfold when sandhill training is given.

Tip # 8: They Need More Than Just Weet-Bix To Get Strong

There are 3 main areas of the body that a distance runner must strengthen: the upper body; core; and lower body. The most important two areas are core and lower body.

Each athlete has individual strengths and weaknesses. If an athlete is given a solid all-round strength program, however, weaknesses will be kept to a minimum, they will be more likely to stay injury free and have a stronger body for quality running. It is up to the coach to deter-



mine what an athlete's major weaknesses are and to give specific exercises that may be beneficial, if need be.

Young distance runner need to maintain a very light build with little muscle mass. They must avoid major hypertrophy (increasing muscle bulk). Thus the majority of exercises are limited to using your own body weight, resisted sports movements and light weights.

My favorite piece of equipment used by juniors is the medicine ball. I recommend that they use in between 2kg and 5kg, depending on their strength. It's best to start with a lighter ball and gradually use heavier balls as they gain strength.

They can do plenty of fun partner activities with medicine balls, including partner sit up throws, gut busters and various other passing activities.

Most exercises can be performed outside in a natural environment. Strength training in many running programs can often seem like one of those extra tasks athletes must do and can often seem like an added burden. I tie strength training in with other sessions, so it doesn't seem like a major burden. For example, each Monday we have an easy 30 minute run, stretching, form drills, 10 minutes of pure speed then 20-30 minutes of strength. The entire session takes about 75 minutes, with strength being just one part of the bigger picture.

There are specific times of the year when runners need to spend either more or less time on strength training. During their 'peak' racing period they will decrease the amount of strength training so they are more rested for races. **RAYL**

**Sean Williams trains approximately 40 Sydney teenagers, as well as many adults (including elites) in a variety of middle distance and distance running events. Sean's approach to coaching runners is a holistic one, blending the mental, physical and spiritual components together so his athletes are prepared from every angle. The majority of Sean's runners are members of Randwick Botany Harriers, a traditional running club that is 98 years old.*



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