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COACHING YOUNG RUNNERS: MORE ART THAN SCIENCE

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Most coaches have read all the same books on running theory and understand what it takes to make kids run fast. But if coaches know so much about running, why do only a few have great programs year after year while others seem to struggle?

The answer is simple. It takes more than just knowing about running to be a successful coach. It takes a coach who knows how to get his or her athletes, even the young ones, excited; willing to put forth the effort; to want to succeed. This is where the *Art of Coaching* comes in.

We all understand that when we put an effort into something, when we try hard, we get far more out of whatever we are doing than if we just go through the motions. For many children, trying hard is a learned behavior -- learned through the opportunity to realize success; to experience the sense of belonging, being part of something special and the pride of having ownership.

These are what get kids to want to do a little more each time, to challenge themselves, to do their very best.

For parents and coaches, here are things you can do to become a successful coach, one that kids will want to run for. And for those parents looking for a coach for their child, here is what you should expect from someone coaching children.

KNOW WHY THEY RUN

To be a great coach starts with knowing why the children are running. If it is because they love to run, great! But if they run because they want the water bottle or T-shirt, or maybe just to be with a friend, or because the parents want the child to run, the coach should know this. Youth running programs built on the presumption that every kid wants to be a runner is a prescription for disappointment, both for the adults and the kids.

BE A LEADER

The best tool a coach has is the ability to lead. To become a leader, be a person whose message, whose demeanor and caring, causes children to want to follow. Show confidence; be someone the kids (and



A good coach for a kids' running program must know something about running and a lot about motivating. For children, getting kids wanting to run is far more important than how far or how fast they run.

adults) will respect, even want to be like. And be excited about what the kids are doing, knowing that excitement is contagious. Most importantly, demonstrate in your own life what you want the children to do; to exercise and eat right, to always be on time, to meet challenges head-on and to be a team player.

THINK LONG TERM

Coaches of young runners should always think in the long term, not about how fast or how far kids can run in elementary school, but about the welfare of the children and who they will become years down the road, whether that road includes a lifetime of running or not.

NO BAGGAGE PLEASE

Be ready to coach, every day, no matter what. If you have a personal or work problem, leave it behind long before the kids arrive. The kids need your full attention; your commitment to what they are doing. What they don't need is someone who is distracted or stressed.

BE ON TIME AND READY TO GO

Kids don't want to sit around waiting to run. Be on time, have a plan, explain the plan quickly and get the kids moving. This means any equipment you need is on-site and set up before the kids arrive, and the volunteers or assistant coaches know their assignments and are ready to go.

TEACH RUNNING

Before every run, tell the kids in very simple terms how what they are going to do will make them better runners. If they are running hills, tell them how this will make them stronger and faster, or how lots of short runs can make them better at running a longer distance. After a while, ask the kids to tell you what benefits they will get from the run they are about to do. You will quickly find out who is listening, but more important, you are causing them to think, and "thinking" runners are good runners.

SOMETHING WORTHY OF ACCOMPLISHING

When you are going to do something new or that will be a challenge for the kids, get them excited about doing it. Mike Parker, coach at Iowa City West, says "Don't just assign them what to do, challenge them to do it. Build it up as a big event, worthy of accomplishing." A good way is to name certain runs. Then, when you talk about these runs, it gives them special status and, perhaps, a bit of mystique.

BE APPROACHABLE, FUN TO BE WITH

Let the kids see you as a responsible, professional adult; but also one with a good sense of humor and the ability to have fun. Show tolerance when kids are just being kids and understand that if they laugh at you, it's a sign of trust. When you ask a kid to pick up a cone (see photo) and they return wearing it on their head, give them a smile or a high

For parents that coach their own child - be careful not to bring the coaching home with you. Kids need to do other things, have other thoughts, to take a respite from running so they, like the other kids, can come back energized. Every time the parent asks some question about how their child felt about today's run, gives a little advice or tells something about the next run, it takes away the "time out" that kids need.



five. If you have a pajama run (which kids love, especially if it involves flashlights) the coach should wear pj's too and be sure to take pictures.

When a child tells you something, no matter how trivial it may seem, drop down to one knee if necessary so you can look them in the eye, and ask them questions. If they tell you about something pending, the next time you see them, ask what happened. Or tell them thanks for sharing their story with you.

SHOW YOU CARE

Every child needs to know you care about them and about their success as a runner. This means you need to show that you care. Be genuine, take time to talk to each runner, telling them what they did right and be specific. Not simply "you did great tonight," but what they did that was great – running an even pace, doing one more trip up the sledding hill, or staying together as a team.

QUICKLY AND QUIETLY

When you feel the need to correct a young runner, no one else needs to hear what you are saying, and especially when you are addressing a behavior issue. Do what the late Coach Joe Newton at York High School, Elmhurst, Ill. did – "do it quickly and quietly." And remember, kids want their coach to be a good person, not just to them but to all their teammates and friends. When you are correcting a child, what you say can have an impact on not just the child to whom you are directing your attention, but on all the children.

NO FAVORITES

The coach's #1 job is to get the kids on their team or program to follow the coach's directions, to trust the coach, to work hard for them. The quickest way to undermine that effort is for the coach to focus on the fast kids or those who are more athletic. Kids will quickly spot if the coach has favorites and just as quickly recognize if they are, or are not, included. Also, if the coach has a son or daughter on the team, the coach must hold them to the same standards as every other child, not more and not less.

EVEN AN ABSENCE IS AN OPPORTUNITY

When a child misses a run because of a family commitment, turn it into an opportunity. Give them a half page form he or she can fill out and turn in the following week reporting they did a "Make-Up Run." And include a space for the parents to sign indicating it was the child's decision to run, not theirs. When a child turns in the form, give them a smile, a pat on the head or shake their hand. Soon you will have kids asking to do a make-up run even when they don't miss a practice.



MISSED AN ISSUE?

- ✓ Success = Motivation
- ✓ Ownership
- ✓ Strong Young Runners
- ✓ More Fun, Less Awards
- ✓ California's JUST RUN
- ✓ Fast is Good!
- ✓ Goal Setting
- ✓ Lessons Learned
- ✓ Early Success vs. Longevity
- ✓ Girl Talk
- ✓ Joy of Discovery
- ✓ HS Coaches Research

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