

HIGH SCHOOL COACHES ON YOUTH RUNNING AND BURNOUT

Written by Douglas Finley, Editor Journal of Children's Running
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By a recent program-by-program count, there are now more than four million children logging miles in elementary school or after-school running programs. (1) Coupling that with the surging number of kids entering recreational Fun Runs and 5K races, there is an expectation that there would be similar growth in the number of kids who would run in high school and beyond. And yes, the number of high school students running cross country is at an all-time high nationally.

However, a growing number of coaches have voiced concern that elementary-school-aged children who routinely enter road races, or Fun Runs with goals (time, place, etc.) common to racing, are at high risk of burnout, and, with apparent frequency, do not continue with the sport.

Underlying this concern were reports made to the Center for Children's Running by coaches whose championship teams were often made up entirely of runners new to the sport; none having regularly competed in road races as children. The untested theory was that children in elementary school who regularly compete in races are at risk of dropping out of the sport by high school.

A parallel issue mentioned by some coaches is the number of road

races that now offer an "open" age category for children -- meaning

no minimum age restriction. Most common are eight-and-under or ten- and-under age categories. This allows preschool children to run in actual races at any distance by simply the

parent paying the entry

fee.

RESEARCH STUDY

To draw clarity to the issue of early participation versus burnout, NOVA Southeastern University researchers Jeff Fountain, Ph.D. and Peter Finley,

“Be patient; there is plenty of time in high school for long races. This is a lifelong sport. Let them finish growing before long races and training begin.”

Female HS Coach

Ph.D., Associate Professors of Sport Management, reached out to veteran high school coaches for their perspective on the impact of

elementary-school-aged children competing at various distances and the likelihood of continued participation in the sport. Nova Southeastern University is a private, highly selective and nationally ranked, research university in South Florida.

The research team believed that veteran high school cross country coaches were best positioned to understand the issues and respond objectively to the questions posed in the study. Five hundred coaches, representing all 50 states, received an invitation to participate. The coaches selected for the study had demonstrated sustainable success as measured by having teams finish in the top 10 in their states' championship events (cross country state finals) at least four times in a five-year span, 2011-2015. The researchers used state finals results in all classifications (small and large enrollments) to determine coaches of both boys' and girls' teams.

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Nearly 83 percent of the 136 coaches that responded to the full survey were male, with 63.6 percent coaching both the girls' and boys' teams.

The objectives of the research team were to determine the coaches' attitudes regarding: (1) appropriate race length for varying age groups;

(2) appropriate ages to transition from "fun running" to competitive races – those that focused on pursuing goals and awards, and involved structured training; (3) their concern about burnout; and (4) appropriate age divisions to offer for children.

Burnout, as applied by the research team, may differ from child to child. For children who race, it may be the stress to improve each time. For others it may be the physical discomfort of running distances longer than the child is physically or emotionally prepared to run. Or it could be the loss of interest in extrinsic motivators (T-shirts, water bottles, medals) or the feeling that running is not their own but an expectation of their parents.

RESEARCH ABSTRACT

In summary, there are six major findings. (2) The statistical term "mean" identifies the central tendency determined by adding all the coaches' responses in terms of appropriate age and dividing by the total number of responses.

1. Coaches identified the longest distance of an organized Fun Run for preschool and lower elementary-aged runners (K-3) should be $\frac{1}{2}$ to one mile (77.1%). The remaining 22.9% was heavily weighted in favor of distances shorter than $\frac{1}{2}$ mile.

2. The mean age established by coaches for children to enter a 5K race or 5K Fun Run, with the purpose of "having fun, walking if necessary, getting a T-shirt, or earning a finisher's

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medal" is age

nine.

3. The mean age for children entering a 5K race for competitive purposes, defined as "the goal of setting a personal best, competing for an age-group placing, appearing in published race results, and winning awards, is age 11."

"Kids respond to the running culture that we, the adults, provide (Fun Runs that become races, age-group competitions, coaches for kids' running, etc). We need to tone it down, especially the pressure we put on kids to perform."

Male HS Coach

"I think short road races are great, if the focus is on fun and fitness, not on the competition. When young children are encouraged to 'push through' pain to be competitive, the risks to future participation far

outweighs the benefits."

Female HS Coach

4. The mean age for children entering a 5K race for competitive purposes, with training defined as "scheduled workouts as opposed to occasional runs, formal coaching, and setting performance goals" are ages associated with middle school, ages 12, 13 or 14.

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5. Eighty-five percent of the coaches responding to the survey either believe or strongly believe that elementary-school-aged children who frequently race at distances 5K or longer are at high risk of burnout from the sport.

6. According to the survey, 71.9 percent of the coaches used words like

risky, dangerous and harmful when describing how they felt about early

elementary-school-aged children entering events (including races) longer than 5K. Eighteen percent were concerned, but short of labeling it as dangerous or harmful. Ten percent expressed little or no concern.

DISCUSSION and CONCLUSIONS

The findings of this study do not completely explain why coaches of championship teams have reported that their teams were comprised entirely of runners who did not compete before high school.

What the study does show is that the participating coaches believe, and by significant margins, that children who do too much too soon, in racing and in the distances they run, increase the prospect they will drop out of the sport before high school.

The risk is minimized, according to the coaches, by allowing children to progress as they mature physically and emotionally, not in one year but from year to year. For early elementary children (K-3), it is short

distances – ½ mile

to one mile Fun Runs. Later it is longer runs but where having fun, joining the crowd and walking if

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necessary are still encouraged. By late elementary school, racing can begin but without training or performance objectives coming into play until middle school.

These guidelines also apply when parents enter their children in races with no minimum age restriction – eight-and-under or ten-and-under. This practice, initiated by race organizers, is in clear conflict with what the vast majority of the responding coaches believe to be appropriate for preschool and early elementary-aged children.

The high level of concern expressed by coaches should send up a warning flag for race organizers, and parents who want their children to continue and enjoy running into the future. The conversation must focus first on the race organizers as they are the gatekeepers with respect to who is allowed to compete in their races, as well as the orchestrators of the awards categories that encourage young runners, sometimes influenced by parents, to enter competitive events and at longer distances than the child is prepared to run.

“I find that the most successful high school runners never competed as kids. Those that competed early, some □ that even excelled, seldom perform any better than the kids who played other sports. Most are simply burnt out by the time they get to high school.”

Male HS Coach

(1) *2017 research findings of JUST RUN, the national youth running program of the Big Sur Marathon.*

(2) The complete results of the NSU study are posted on The Sport Journal website. Search: *Road Races and Youth Running: Cross Country Coaches' Perspective, 2017*

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