

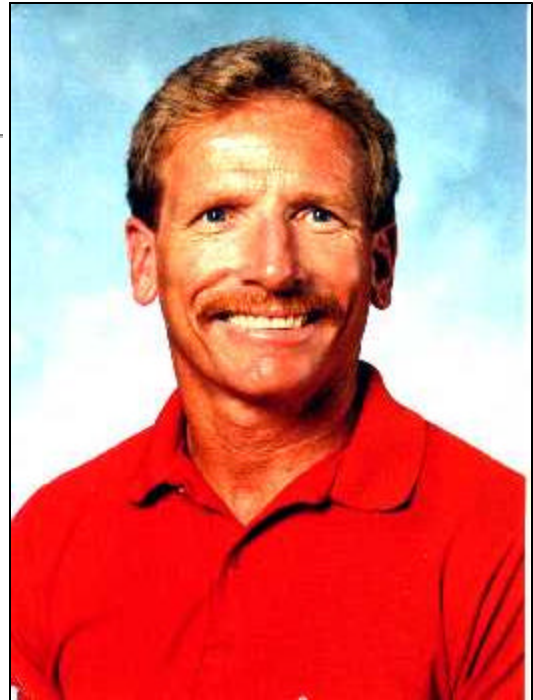
# The Total Distance Runner

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Many distance coaches have trouble getting their runners to enjoy track. Distance runners enjoy the wide open spaces of cross country running, but many feel confined by running continuously around a track. If they become bored and lose interest it results in poor performances. Athletes who are great cross country runners may become only good or average track runners.

On the other side are middle distance runners who should be good cross country athletes, but don't perform up to their abilities. They feel intimidated by running 3 miles in cross country and bored by the daily distance runs. They see no point to distance workouts and would rather be on the track running shorter, faster intervals where they can see more progress.



## Development of Successful Teams in Both Sports

Some schools are good in cross country and others are good in track, but very few are competitive in both. The success the school has in both sports really motivates the distance runner to want to participate in both sports. For example, the best sprinters at school want to run on the distance medley and sprint medley because they realize that their distance teammates are very competitive and the chances of getting medals at relay meets are very good. On the other side, the distance runners are motivated to perform at their best because they are always going to be in the "hunt" based on the performances of the sprinters. The sprinters cheer on the distance runners and vice versa. Some of these athletes walk away from relay meets with 3 and 4 medals each. If the distance runner can see some success for his/her hard work, they are more likely to enjoy their track experience, even though they may not like working out on the track. School's who have won many dual meets and invitationals are successful because of overall team balance--not just great individuals. The need to uphold the role of the distance runner on the track team helps to motivate the cross country runner to want to participate. If he/she works hard there is a benefit (awards) at the end.

The second aspect of developing a solid distance program is to have a year-round running program. This program involves various types of running to motivate and hold the interest of the runner. Running long distance is hard, tedious and boring. It has to be fun, not boring, so

that the coach doesn't lose the runner. Divide the year into phases -- 1) summer, 2) fall/cross country, 3) winter and 4) spring/track. Even though it is a year-round program, give athletes "time off." It is very, very important that distance runners have a chance to get away from running and do other things. It is not only a physical rest, as some coaches think, but a mental break. They need to recharge their batteries so they want to run. After a break runners will come up and ask to start running again, which tells the coach they are rested (mentally & physically) and ready for the next season.

## Summer

The first phase of the season is summer. Runners should run as soon as school ends in June. One week before school ends have a cross country team meeting. Each runner should be given a weekly chart telling them what to do until the team starts meeting towards the end of July. The running is all distance, no track workouts. Keep the runners away from the all-comers meets and road races, because too many races in the summer leads to burn-out or peaking early during the cross country season.

Try not to run the same road run twice in a two week period. This helps with the boredom and makes the running more enjoyable. Explore new places, drive away from the area, especially if you don't have hills nearby. The more different the runs, the better it is. Cap off the summer with a running camp in the mountains. It is a great time to get in some tough running, but more importantly, the team has a chance to bond as they head into the cross country competition.

## Fall/Cross Country

The second phase of the year-round program is the fall or cross country season. Most distance runners enjoy cross country because it is different and more varied than running around the track. The real coaching comes with convincing the 800/1600 (middle distance runner) that he/she can be a successful cross country runner. The workouts must not be boring for the middle distance runner. An example would be playing games, like progressive tag, where speed and fartlek are important so runners will feel like they can finish at the top. Being part of a winning program also helps motivate the middle distance runner to be part of the team.

After cross country, the whole team takes a break from running. From the middle of November to Christmas vacation, there is no running. This is a very important because the athlete has been running steadily from late June (4 months) with no break. They "need" this period of time to rest and relax their minds. This time away is critical if you want the distance runner to run track. They need time to regroup and get ready.

One recommendation is to have a distance pentathlon at the end of cross country season. Since they are in great shape, motivate them to run track by timing them in the 400, 800, 1200, 1600 and 3200. Keep records to make it interesting and competitive. The veteran

runners get excited about track, because they can see some improvement from last track season. The upper class runner can point this out to younger or new runners. It's also an excellent opportunity for the coach to evaluate the talent for the upcoming track season.

## Winter

Runners begin the third phase of the year-round program with winter running to prepare for the track season. Begin during Christmas vacation and build up the base until they jump on the track around the middle to late February. Usually, athletes are enthusiastic about running again because they had a break.

Keep them off the track so they won't "burn out" from too much track running. Most complaints from runners come because they don't like running around the track. Hills, tempo running and fartlek are good ways to get runners into shape without doing intervals on the track. This allows them some freedom to do other workouts. Because they have been working hard, it won't take long for them to run well once the interval training on the track begins. Remember, the sooner a runner begins intervals on the track, the sooner the athlete begins to run towards his/her peak with a greater risk of burn-out as May rolls around. So, try to keep them off the track so they will peak later in the season and their legs and minds will be fresher.

After the track season, the distance runners take another break until summer running begins in late June. This gives them about six weeks off so they can relax and rest like they did in the fall after cross country. They are usually ready to begin running again as the school year ends.

Remember, the key to getting middle distance and distance runners interested in both sports is activities and variation to keep their interest.