

How To Support The Cross Country Runner In Your Life

A parent's guide to the best ways to help your cross country runner succeed and enjoy the sport.



Jonathan Beverly
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Every cross country parent wants their child to do well. We often struggle, however, in knowing how best to support and encourage them. A parent's role in a runner's success is as or more important than the coach's, but entirely different. Learning more about the sport can provide insight into how a parent can excel in filling this essential position on the team.

The Rebuilders

Unlike many other sports, where the majority of training is learning skills and plays, training for running is primarily conditioning: adapting the body to be able to handle the demands of speed and distance. Conditioning works by stressing the body beyond what it has been accustomed to, tearing it down with hard training sessions. The body responds by calling in reinforcements and rebuilding stronger so that it can handle the stress the next time it has to face it without damage. Without recovery and rebuilding, runners get more and more beat up until they break.



Photo: Renae Bottom/Chase County Schools Media

Thus, recovery time between workouts is more important than the workouts. And, two of three elements of recovery - time, fuel and sleep - fall in the parents' realm. Allowing enough time between hard workouts to enable rebuilding is the coach's responsibility. Ensuring that the runner gets adequate fuel and sleep happens when the runner is home with the parent.

The best way to help your runner get stronger and faster is to improve their nutrition and encourage adequate sleep. Nutrition needn't be complicated: They don't need special protein shakes or excess carbs. They do need a variety of fresh, whole foods and to minimize processed products full of sugar. Make it easy for them to snack on fruit. Provide regular, old-fashioned meals with a balance of protein, carbs and colorful vegetables. Help them keep hydrated with water.

As for sleep, the more they can get the better. Elite runners report sleeping up to 14 hours a day. Teens need 8-10 hours even when they aren't adding the additional stress of distance running. We can't, of course, make our kids sleep, but we can help them take it seriously, do the math on when they should be headed to bed, and encourage them to create a sleep-conducive environment in their bedrooms: cool, dark, quiet, and free from technological distractions (particularly phones).

A Mental Balancing Act

Knowing how to best encourage a young athlete to do their best is difficult for parents in any sport. It may be even harder in cross country because of the unique challenges of distance running.

When running a 5K, you're not only trying to focus and execute an athletic skill, but you're also in a constant struggle to balance your effort with the demands of the remaining distance, given your body's current signals of distress. You're always asking, "Am I able to do this?" Training is as much about honing runners' belief in their ability to handle harder and harder efforts and not blow up, as it about building physical skill.

The goal is to reach a point where high skill meets high challenge; as the race grows increasingly more difficult, you're able to say, "This is really hard - and I've got it!" In these moments, the runner can focus fully on running well, tapping into all of his or her skill to succeed; he or she can find "flow".



Photo: 101 Degrees West

Note, however, that this challenge and skill are both self-perceived and constantly variable. You not only need the skill to meet the challenge, you also have to believe that you have it - and that belief is fragile and fickle. Whenever the perceived challenge - holding the pace, climbing this hill, needing to pass another runner - exceeds a runners' belief that they can accomplish it, they become overwhelmed, withdraw from the struggle and start to make excuses.

As a parent, you've seen this happen: They come by you on the course, dramatically in distress, breathing raggedly, form falling apart or holding their side; they may even call out, "I can't..." Less dramatically, they simply withdraw from the challenge and fall back in the pack, afterwards providing excuses or expressing bewilderment at their inability to perform as expected.

Managing Expectations

Which brings us to our role as parents. The worst thing we can do before or during a race is to increase the challenge beyond our runner's perceived skill. Raising the challenge is easy to do and often well-intentioned. For example, the day before the race, or at breakfast on race morning, we ask if they are going to win, or break 20 minutes today, or beat a rival runner. We tell them we believe they can, thinking we are being encouraging.

But if the runner doesn't believe it, we've already set an expectation they need to meet or explain why they couldn't. We've already started the internal panic that the task is bigger than they can accomplish, the feeling of being overwhelmed, the need to find excuses.



Photo credit: Renae Bottom/Chase County Schools Media

What can we say that tells them we care and want them to be the best runner they can be? One suggestion is to simply ask, "Are you going to do your best?" When they say yes, leave it at that. Say you are proud of them and looking forward to seeing them run.

You can ask them their goals, but be sure to accept what they say is the best they believe they can do on this day - even if that is less than what you know they are capable of. Runners have enough people setting expectations they have to live up to, from teammates to coaches to fans in the community. Encourage your runner to set multiple goals: some that are a reach and only possible if all goes well, some that are realistic based on recent workouts, and some fallback that they can hold onto and accomplish even on a bad day. One of the beauties of cross country is that every scoring runner matters equally, and every runner has multiple ways to measure progress and success in each race.

If In Doubt, Cheer

During the race, recognize that your runner is treading a continual tightrope between caring and despairing, pushing harder and giving up. Many well-meaning sideline cheers - "Pass that girl now!" "Push it!" "Kick it in!" - add to the challenge side of the equation, giving the runner more to deal with rather than more confidence to succeed. Even encouraging cheers like, "You've got this!" or "You're strong!" can be interpreted as pressure when the runner doesn't feel that way at the moment - causing them to start looking for excuses for why they aren't as strong as you think they are.

What does help from the sidelines? Everyone likes to hear something different. Some runners like information: Split times, how far the next runner is behind them, how bad the runner ahead of them looks (without adding, "You can get her!" - they need to decide that). Some like reminders of things they can do to focus and run better, cheers like, "Stay tall!" "Breathe," "Quick strides," "Relax your shoulders." Some might have a mantra they'll share with you: "I'm in control," "Relax and fly," "Shut up and run"... Ask your runner what will motivate and help him or her.

The safest, always welcome thing to do on the sidelines is what fans do in all other sports where they aren't close enough to feel they have to instruct or bolster: They clap, whistle, get excited, cheer: "Way to go!" "Great job!"

The One They Never Have to Apologize To

After the race, be the one who is proud regardless of the outcome. Ask how they felt about it. Accept their analysis. Celebrate every improvement and resist the urge to immediately raise the bar to the next level.

Praise their effort as much or more than their success. Make it your goal to be the one person they never have to make excuses to, because they know your care is not dependent on how fast a runner they are. If they need to work harder to accomplish their goals, let the coach figure out how to get them to the point where they can give that level of effort. Your support, combined

with growing skill and confidence, will carry them higher than they can imagine today, and you'll get to celebrate every step of improvement together.

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