

# ***techniques***

**for Track & Field and Cross Country**

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## **JUMP ON IT!**

**A MULTI-DIMENSIONAL  
APPROACH TO STRENGTH  
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OFFICIAL PUBLICATION  
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**ALSO:**  
**ESSENTIAL SKILLS IN  
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# The Roles of Club and High School Programs





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BY CHARMAS B. LEE

Successful track and field athletes are not always those who possess the most talent or have the best genetics. Successful athletes believe strongly in their abilities, possess a positive attitude, train smart, have a tremendous work ethic and possess confidence based on dynamic physical and mental preparation. Successful athletes etch personal mission statements into their minds and hearts. These athletes come from various backgrounds and have learned to take advantage of their advantages, and in many cases, they have also learned to take advantage of their disadvantages by running towards success. In some instances these athletes have also incorporated developmentally appropriate year-round training to enhance the overall track and field experience.

In most cases, for an athlete to reach a genetic ceiling or potential, it takes continuity and cooperation from everybody involved in their athletic development. That level of involvement raises the question. "Is it possible for an athlete to participate in year-round, organized club-based and school-based programs without forcing the athlete to choose between the two?"

If it is possible to do that, then can there be a collaborative effort between the athlete, parent, high school coach and club coach to enhance the track and field experience?

Covey (2003) suggests that win-win is a frame of mind and heart that constantly seeks mutual benefit in all human interactions. Everyone must be willing to adopt a spirit of cooperation versus an attitude of competition to reach the desired outcome. A more in-depth definition of the term "desired outcome" could be suggested to equate to success on the track or field and remaining injury free with minimal or no negative impact to the athlete's academic or social life. The desired outcome may not be possible and failure may be imminent in the absence of clearly defined goals, proper planning and like-minded thinking.

Physical and mental preparation can be taxing for athletes. Problems arise when high school and club coaches have different goals and different educational and athletic philosophies. If there is no common ground, there is a good chance the athlete will be placed in an unstable position mentally, physically,





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spiritually and psychologically. The instability results in decreased performance, increased chance of injury along with emotional, physical and psychological stress. Overtraining and ultimately burnout is also a likely byproduct of this instability.

#### THE HOLISTIC PERSPECTIVE OF TRAINING AND PERFORMANCE

Henschen (2008) said, "Performance is 95 percent physical and 5 percent mental; but the 5 percent mental rules the 95 percent physical." To be a good athlete, psychological training is essential. Athletes need mental skills to attain optimal performance. Mind and body need to work together. Excess tension, distractions and misdirected focus are negative factors, all of which may be better controlled with enhanced mental skills. These psychological factors are so powerful that they may easily negate thousands of hours of physical training. Being a successful student athlete requires leading a balanced lifestyle. "Family members, teammates, girlfriends, boyfriends, best friends, opponents, school, jobs, church and the coach all want 100 percent of their piece of the athlete's life!" (Veney, 2006)

In many instances today, there is not an integrated and balanced format in place for the student athlete that offers a stepwise approach for an easy transition between the high school program and the club program. When young and developing athletes train and compete all year, the short

and long term effects of such things as developmental readiness and appropriateness of training and competitive experiences must be considered.

#### HIGH SCHOOL AND CLUB BASED TRACK AND FIELD PROGRAMS

Club athletes aren't necessarily good because they belong to a club nor are high school athletes necessarily not good because they don't. If looking at a random sample of athletes, it would be very difficult to determine who was a club athlete, a high school athlete or an unattached athlete. Based on pre-disposed genetics, environmental influences, culture and other variables athletes in all venues will demonstrate various levels of talent. Each group will consist of skilled and unskilled athletes. Some will have talent and others won't.

The key ingredients for both high school and club programs include of course the athletes, but also training facilities, budget, coaches, equipment, transportation, medical support and parental support. Both programs promote health on a large scale, specifically cardiovascular conditioning and muscle development. In addition, there is the competitive aspect, the opportunity to represent a school or club in a positive manner and the possibility for the individual to draw the attention of college coaches who may present an opportunity to compete beyond high school or club settings.



## TRAINING SEASONS

Between club and high school seasons, an athlete may be competing in both indoor and outdoor competitions. Additionally, the middle distance and distance athletes will most likely be involved with Cross Country which means they could potentially be training and competing year round. (see Table 1.0 for a sample Seasonal Cycle for Track and Field) and will need to follow an well structured annual plan or a 12-month continuum.

## AGE-GROUP DISTINCTIONS

A primary difference that exists between the club and high school competitions is that during the club season, athletes compete in age groups. The high school age athlete will fall into one of three age divisions, 13 & 14, 15 & 16 or 17 & 18. Competing against athletes their own age may aid in the development of their self confidence and competitive spirit. From a technical development standpoint, differences in the size and weight of throwing implements or the distance and height of hurdle races for example offers younger athletes an opportunity to learn events without having to compromise proper technique.

## COACHING EDUCATION

Whether it is in a high school or club setting, many coaches still train athletes much the same way they were coached. As in other sports, parents don't mind lending a hand, but often times they don't possess the specialized knowledge needed to teach proper technique or design appropriate training plans. As is the case with all coaches in any sport, a background that includes a formal coaching education/certification program and knowledge of sport sciences via a physical education degree or other specific training is essential to insuring the coach possesses the knowledge skills and ability to properly instruct the athlete in sport specific training. There are multiple opportunities offered by organizations such as the USTFCCCA and USATF for both experienced coaches and novices to improve their knowledge of the sport by participating in clinics and schools hosted by these organizations.

## RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN HIGH SCHOOL AND CLUB PROGRAMS

For years the state of the relationship between high school and club programs has been fragile at best. Problems and conflicts develop when there is a lack of communication between the high school coach and club coach, when coaches have different goals, come from different backgrounds, have different mindsets, dissimilar educational and athletic philosophies, unclear goals and don't develop a clearly defined annual plan. At the end of the day, athletes are stuck in the middle.

When an athlete is involved in a year-round program, there are many concerns. Multiple messages from different coaches can lead to confusion and frustration. Some coaches have the win-at-all-costs mindset while others are more focused on the whole-person development. Constant training can limit some of the opportunities for social development and doesn't permit the athlete to embrace other pertinent aspects of adolescent growth.

Also, note that the high school track and field programs and club programs operate at different times of the year, as pointed

out earlier (see Table 1.0). There is very little, if any, requirement for athlete sharing. To the outside observer it would appear that this would be a perfect marriage to develop strength, power, speed, endurance and other bio-motor abilities. Yet, in many cases, it doesn't work well.

A climate for misunderstandings, dissention or conflict between the athlete and the coaches can exist because coaches in both club and high school programs come from a variety of backgrounds and have different philosophies. The consensus among George (2006), Henschen (2008), and Vernacchia

TABLE 1.0 SEASONAL CYCLES FOR TRACK AND FIELD

SEASON	TIME TABLE	PROGRAM
Cross Country (or Fall Training for non xc athletes)	Mid August to Mid/Late October	High School Program
Restoration/Recovery	Late October to Mid November	Club Program
Indoor Track and Field	Mid November to Early February	
Restoration/Recovery	Early February to Mid February	High School Program
Track and Field	Mid February to Mid May 14	
Restoration/Recovery	Mid May to Late May	Club Program
Outdoor Track and Field	Late May to Early August	
Restoration/Recovery	Early August to Mid August	

(1996), however, remains that preparation breeds confidence. The additional training the club athlete receives may bring a psychological advantage based on developmental opportunities, training years, coach selection, competition seasons, racing years and racing experience.

## CHALLENGES TO ESTABLISHING CONTINUITY

In order to establish cooperation and continuity, we have to address some of the challenges that the athletes and coaches face. Foremost, we must understand that there is no quick fix to this problem. The quick fix is simply a mirage. "We can't talk our way out of problems that we have behaved our way into." (Covey 2003) The relationship between club and high school track and field has been in a chronic state for years. Building and repairing relationships are long term investments and will take time.

Albert Einstein once said, "The significant problems that we face cannot be solved at the same level of thinking we were at when we created them." At the very least coaches on both sides must be willing to put aside personal agendas and have an athlete-first mindset.

A paradigm shift is required for this to happen. In Steven Covey's highly acclaimed book *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, he defines a paradigm shift as "originally a scientific term, more commonly used today to mean a model, theory, perception, assumption or frame of reference." In the general sense, it's the way we see the world, not in terms of our visual sense of sight, but in terms of perceiving, understanding and interpreting. To be successful, coaches would be required to develop commonalities in thinking, working together, beginning with the end in mind. Outdated coaching techniques, coaching egos and inherited coaching styles would have to be placed on the shelf. →

Effective, reliable communication, the sharing of resources, coaching experience and a pursuit in higher education would be the charge of the day.

If establishing continuity is viewed as a leadership issue, perhaps the following leadership formula adapted from Coaching Mental Excellence (Vernacchia, McGuire & Cook, 1996) will prove to be helpful:

*Leadership = Integrity x Communication x Understanding of Human Development, Behavior and Performance.*

Covey (2003) indicates that in order to be successful when working on a common project, one person's mission cannot be another person's insignificant matter. What is important to the high school coach including goals, desires and wants must be equally important to the club coach. To be effective it is imperative that coaches, parents and athletes would need to develop a harmonious relationship.

### AN EXAMPLE OF ACHIEVEMENT THROUGH CONTINUITY AND COOPERATION BETWEEN A HIGH SCHOOL AND CLUB PROGRAM

From a coaching perspective the high school distance coach and the club sprint coach were polar opposites. It certainly made sense, based on their backgrounds that they would have separate and distinctly different thought processes. Through much communication during the high school track and field season, several meetings occurred to develop a "meeting of the minds" resulting in agreeing to disagree but with a willingness to move forward. Through this process a tremendous level of trust was developed. The coaches simply applied the principles of synergy (the whole being stronger than the sum of its parts). The coaches valued each others opinions and worked diligently to do what was in the best interest of the athletes. Much time and effort was spent discussing and applying training theory through various training modalities. This was a perfect example of creative cooperation, resulting in highly structured practices, athlete buy-in, high expectations and ultimately success on the track. The high school distance coach recognized the benefits of the nervous system training that the sprinters performed daily and the club sprint coach embraced the approach of fitness and base development for the middle and distance athlete. Soon the athletes were performing the appropriate continuous warm-ups, complimented with an arsenal of drills and event-specific energy systems training!

That summer, based on a recommendation from the high school cross country coach, several members of the high school cross country team trained twice weekly with the club athletes, with an emphasis on improving running economy, endurance and confidence. In the fall, based on a recommendation from the club sprint coach, the club athletes that competed in the 400 meter dash and 300 meter hurdles trained with the high school cross country team on a "nine to twelve-twelve to twenty miles per week" program orchestrated by the high school cross country coach!

By applying the synergistic approach, there was a mutual benefit for both the high school and the club programs. The high school cross country team placed second in the state championships and the club athletes were Junior Olympic National Finalists in the 300-meter hurdles. Upon completion of the cross country season, both the long sprinters (400-meter and 300-meter hurdlers) and the cross country athletes were given a well deserved *restoration period with*

*both passive and active recoveries* and then they began indoor training. The transition was simple; these athletes retained about 40-50 percent of the base that was developed during the cross country season, while complimenting other training requirements with speed development, primarily through skills, drills and strength work. Competition during the winter season was optional for most.

### RECOMMENDATIONS AND GUIDELINES

Remember, the way we view the problem, is the problem. A paradigm shift will be required, embracing an athletes' first mindset. Coaches must dismiss the us-versus-them mindset. Build trust through communication, shared values and a demonstrated concern for the educational and athletic welfare of each member of your team and the family team. One of the most important ways to manifest integrity is to be loyal to those who are not present. In doing so, we build the trust of those who are present. No backbiting from the coaches, along with a unified front and collaborative effort is essential. To eliminate frustration, confusion or conflict, clarify expectations from each party involved. In some cases a contract may be required. Coaches and parents must learn to stay in their lanes to avoid such collisions. Set parameters and boundaries.

Plan the work and work the plan. Develop and implement



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an annual training plan that is inclusive of the four dimensions of renewal to enhance the educational experience for the student athlete.

Physical – (training, nutrition)

Mental Skills Training – (stress management, reading, visualizing, planning, writing mental toughness training, positive self talk)

Social/Emotional – (service, empathy, synergy, intrinsic security)

Spiritual – (value, clarification, commitment, study and meditation)

Balance and flexibility are critical components of this plan. Avoid overtraining, overreaching, burnout and potential injury by selecting the appropriate competitions. Be sure each practice is goal oriented. Schedule active and passive recoveries. Encourage athletes to journal everything. All parties involved should attempt to meet quarterly to gauge the progress of the athlete. Be an active listener. Ask questions for clarity. Most importantly be patient, success does not come over night. It comes over time.

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