

Coaching in an urban school:

When I first arrived at Renton High in the Fall of 1996 the cross-country team was composed of 6 guys and 2 girls. The coach had been there for about 6 years and was very dynamic, had a good rapport with his runners and provided a great deal of support for the individuals on the team. However, the coach did not teach in the building and it was very difficult to get kids to turn out or even know what cross-country was and how it could benefit all types of student/athletes. It was my first year teaching so I didn't really get involved in cross-country until the following year. In 1997, I became the assistant coach and our numbers soared to 28 runners and we had full teams for both boys and girls for the first time in several years. This was in large part due to the fact that I was in the building and constantly talking to kids about running opportunities, getting in shape, developing an "edge" in life, increasing intellectual abilities by releasing endorphins, etc. I became the head coach in the Fall of 1999 and our numbers were still rising to around 35. The last several years we've been at around 40 runners and this past season we had 24 boys and 17 girls. There are several reasons for this transformation some of which probably due to the natural cycle of things.

- 1) I started coaching track in the Spring of 2000 and this helped me develop relationships with all types of athletes ... develop trust and respect.
- 2) Team members are available for runs in the summer and winter. Kids love to hang out with their friends and if that means meeting for a run on a summer evening they will do it.
- 3) Hang up flyers in the hallways and send students personal notes to attend informational meetings throughout the school year to peak their interest and get them involved.
- 4) Display pictures and trophies from events we've had in glass cases around the school so students see what we are doing.
- 5) Encourage the current athletes to get their friends out for the team.
- 6) Develop and train captains to lead in a positive, encouraging, and all-inclusive way.
- 7) Have BBQ's or potlucks even in the off-season ... we meet once in the winter for a potluck and games.
- 8) Remind the team of past history and success. Most urban schools had a great tradition at one time ... find the records and post them ... give kids a goal and belief that it can be done.
- 9) Have an assistant coach that is also in the building. This is huge. The more people talking to kids about running the better.
- 10) Contact the wrestling coach and develop a united front to get boys out. Many of the wrestlers at RHS run cross-country and in return many cross-country runners will join wrestling ... it's a win-win for both programs. It's hard for many runners (even with good intentions) to run during the winter months due to the weather, but if they are in wrestling they continue to develop as an athlete and it gives them an opportunity to try another sport.
- 11) Get in contact with the middle school track coaches. The coach at the middle school that feeds into Renton High has been coming out and running with kids in the summer for the past 3 years and it has helped build team relationships tremendously.
- 12) Keep it fun! Let the athletes know that the main goal is to enjoy running to the point that it will become a lifelong activity.

13) Build in your own traditions ... currently I have the athletes design the t-shirts for our team ... each year there is much anticipation and excitement over the new design and they know that one of their teammates created it ... it adds to the "family" concept of team. Other traditions include certain runs or workouts that the kids know about and enjoy comparing from season to season.

The main thing to remember is that it is not easy to get boys out for cross-country especially at urban schools where football, and basketball (which seems to be year round) are so popular. It is also difficult to get girls because of the popularity of soccer, volleyball and the fact the swimming is also in the Fall. The one advantage about cross-country is that you typically get out what you put in. If I can convince student/athletes to try it for a season I usually will get them to return again. Also, for many students that have not tried a sport this is a perfect choice because there isn't a certain set of skills that they require in order to "make" the team. Everyone gets to run, everyone goes the same distance (on race day), and everyone can inspire and make a difference.

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