
On Coaching Runners

Cavall says this piece comes out of his 40+ years of involvement in running and several years as a cross country and distance coach on the high school level in Buffalo, N.Y. He continues to coach runners on an individual basis.

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I was reading a running column in a daily newspaper the other day and it discussed a coach communicating his workout to a female masters runner. The workout was a hodgepodge of various reps you see so much of these days. It got me thinking about coaches and how rare truly good ones are. As a former running coach, I thought about the running coaches I had known, as well as coaches in other sports. What makes a good coach? Does every runner even need one?

Let me start by saying, "Is there any other title (coach) where you can just sort of assume it?" It often appears to me that the only real qualification needed to be a coach is a willingness to be available. I've seen where knowledge of the sport and other necessary qualities often take a back seat to simply being able to show up. I've spoken to athletic directors whose primary concern regarding a coach was finding someone who was reliable.

So again, what's needed to be a good coach? First of all, I would agree with the great Australian coach Percy Cerutti that the coach should be physically active and in fairly good condition. He said: "Unfit, inactive coaches can never fully know." This may seem un-

necessary to some but, like it or not, all coaches are role models. I've witnessed the derision given to a former track coach (behind his back, of course) for his deplorable physical condition, as well as the admiration for another who regularly logged many miles.

Secondly, you must have the right reasons for wanting to be a coach. Your main motivation must be a desire to help and guide the athlete to achieve the highest possible level he can achieve for that particular season. I have seen too many coaches who get the most satisfaction out of being in charge or basking in the success of a team or athlete.

Believe it or not, for many, coaching is just a way to supplement their income. If you ever want to see if your coach or son's or daughter's coach is truly into it, just watch and see if he pays attention to the athletes who aren't the top performers on his team. If he or she doesn't, I'd be concerned. Remember, you're a coach of all the athletes on your team.

Next, knowledge of the sport and its fundamentals is essential. If you're weak in this area, you'd better learn in a hurry or get an assistant who knows. Arthur Lydiard once said that if your

coach can't give you a reason for his workouts, you'd better get another coach who can.

Not surprisingly, being a former "great" in your sport is no guarantee of coaching success. We've seen it time and time again in college and professional sports—the hall-of-famer who bombs as a coach.

There are many reasons. To be able to articulate the skills to your athletes is essential. For many great athletes who were "naturals" the ability to convey the how-to's is just not there. Another reason is that some don't realize that everyone isn't possessed with the same inborn abilities they had and athletes aren't going to arrive at the same point even if they do what you say.

A coach once said of former mediocre pro football player, now excellent coach, Marty Schottenheimer, "He knows what to do; he just can't get there quick enough." Suffice to say that knowledge of the fundamentals of your sport and the ability to communicate it to your athletes is vital.

A running coach, especially one who is guiding individuals, needs to be able to personalize the training programs of each athlete. Every athlete is unique and has his strengths and

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weaknesses. A coach must be able to determine what they are and make adjustments to fit each runner's needs. Believe me, individuals or a team do not all start at the same point.

Of course the ultimate goal is to have all your athletes begin the season healthy, in shape and ready to endure a rigorous competitive schedule. How often have you seen the runner who begins the season running great times but does less well as the season progresses? Well, just remember, it's always the runner's fault, never the coach's (yeah, right).

Now to a most important ability a coach must have: to be able to calm, encourage, motivate and provide confidence to an athlete. Many an athlete's career has been ruined by a coach's lack of expertise in this department. I would go so far as to say a coach would be better off lacking knowledge of technique and training than not being able to deal with his runner's psyche.

All athletes need to be calmed (to varying degrees) and encouraged prior to competition. Many, but not all, require advice on race strategy. Needless to say, younger and less experienced athletes will need more attention in these areas.

As a coach and observer of runners

for many years, it's the rare athlete who, on his own, will run with supreme confidence and know what to do strategically. When your athlete does not perform up to his or your expectations, he (she) must be consoled and encouraged

I am absolutely dumbfounded by the number of coaches who will actually berate their athletes, or worse yet, ignore them after poor performances. Once again, this is particularly devastating to the younger athlete. Most runners know when they've "blown it" and are highly critical of themselves, especially right after the race. The coach should step in at the proper time to reassure the athlete and evaluate with him where he may have gone wrong.

There is something to be learned from all performances, good and bad. A coach who yells at a runner after a sub-par race should ask himself why he got into coaching in the first place. Would it be an exaggeration to say you notice this most in coaches who haven't competed themselves? The positively worst legacy a coach can leave is that many of his runners quit the sport after they left his program.

As an aside, I believe it's a poor idea for a father or mother to formally coach their children. To clarify this,

I'm not talking about dispensing a little running advice or encouragement here and there, I mean real coaching. When sub-par performances come (and they will) many children feel bad enough and don't need the extra burden of believing they've let Mom or Dad down. There is, of course, that emotional bond (or barrier) between child and parent that gets in the way of a healthy coach-athlete relationship. Parenting is tough enough without introducing this potential emotional powder keg.

Finally, who needs a coach? Do you need a coach? Obviously anyone in a school or college program needs a coach, but whether or not the coach will be good for the athlete is another story. I'm still baffled by coaches who put their runners through the cross country, indoor and outdoor track seasons and expect them to be in top form for all three. A battered athlete syndrome if there ever was one!

Other athletes who need a coach are those who appear to have the ability to compete on a national level. As far as the rest of us who just want to do as well as we can without high aspirations, I'd say having a personal coach is not necessary. We should however seek out a training program that is well-proven and suits our needs.