

Why Kids Aren't Running Anymore...
And what we can do to fix it!

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In America, a joyous, simply competitive activity is losing its edge. Running is dying. Even worse, it seems our country is caring less and less about it. As our kids continue to get fatter to the point that you can almost hear them growing at the waistline, we now have learned that they will have less of a life expectancy than their current grandparents!

In schools across America, Physical Education classes are getting cut, limiting physical activity opportunity to thousands of children. Even in the schools that have Physical Education, kids are afraid to run one little mile, let alone be able to even run it! Now, it is commonplace for a kid to be instructed to just walk the mile, mostly because they are too out of shape to run it. Sad, isn't it?

Then we come up on the fact that when a kid turns 12 or 13, they can join all these wonderful sports. They are drawn towards the "Big 3": Baseball, Football, & Basketball. Volleyball & Soccer also show up as being popular choices. These sports run short distances, covered at high speeds & actions. Its no wonder our country loves these sports. They mimic our fast-paced, go-all-out nature of our society. Ironically, we tend to lead sedentary lives in a majority of the work we do, and this laziness gets into our kids. This sedentary nature leaves us with a disdain for long, slow activity, such as the sport of running. We simply 'do not have the time' for these long, slow activities. Its why most adults avoid working out, even walking seems to take too long for them!

It appears that our only image of running is that of a marathoner. Someone running along for sometimes hours on end, plodding around at slow paces, that's the picture we vision. As a running coach, I have talked with kids who tend to believe that "all cross-country ends up being is just a bunch of long, boring miles." Even the sport of track, which can cover distances from 100 meters to 2 miles, has this connotation amongst our youth. I've seen kids who choose to start out with just the 100 or 200 distances, because 'that's as far as I think I can run.' Honestly. Is our society getting this bad about our vision & image of running?

I think its time for a change, ladies & gentlemen.

As a coach, I have observed the following:

1. Kids today do not need to have the image of long, slow, plodding miles being done in preparation for the sport of track, or for cross-country. To me, its anything but boring, it's a true test of the athlete inside you, & it can teach you so much about yourself. This is the American competitive spirit, at its purest form! Why aren't we emphasizing this more in our youth?
2. The sports of track & cross-country have 'mini-races' inside them, which challenges the athlete in many ways. The athlete battles wind, gravity, Mother Nature (snow, sleet, rain), and their own mind. They not only battle those 4 foes, but they enter battles amidst other runners as well. Strategies need to be implemented, literally on-the-fly. Athletes who develop this task-on-the-fly skill will have an edge over their competition in other sports. Once again, it's the competitive spirit development that kids are missing out on!

3. The distances covered that seem to be labeled 'long distance', such as the 3200m, 4000m, and 5000m races, aren't really 'long' in my opinion. When you take a look at elite and top-level times, those races can be done in 10 minutes or less (3200m) or 14-18 minutes (4K, 5K). These are intensity-filled, high speed racing periods of time, not something slow & boring! If you've watched such a race, you know what I mean. These runners endure high intense speeds, many of which some sprinters and mid-distance runners couldn't keep up for much time. I'm not sure they should be in the same category of 'long distance' as the 10K, half-marathon, or marathon races are by many experts.
4. Typical Marathon-based principles don't have a place in our society for youth runners. That is a rather bold statement, and here's why I make that statement. We have to take a look at the larger, bigger picture of our country's athletic landscape. We have kids who play 2-4 sports in a year in most regions of the country. Some may even specialize in a speed & power sport (basketball, hockey), but participate in other sports, purely for the enjoyment of it. If these athletes undergo typical marathon principles of long, slow runs of multiple miles, usually 2.5 to 4 times their typical racing distance, this type of endurance training will defeat the purpose of getting faster for other speed & power sports! It all comes down to fast-twitch & slow-twitch fibers: if you focus too much training time on long, slow runs, the slow-twitch fibers get more development, and the fast-twitch fibers suffer. No speed development. Speed is LOST, not gained, with these longer-than-should-be runs. Overuse injuries also increase amongst these athletes. Therefore, they are not needed for a majority of today's athletes.

It is my belief that young kids can be trained in this simple way: fast, short, low volume, and intense. This is the type of environment they will face in a track or cross-country race. Short, high speed bursts are used for hill climbing, plus surging/passing. Body control is needed on downhill runs, to conserve energy and save it wisely for latter portions of the race. These short, fast, and intense runs are not much different than the type of training they endure during a typical speed & power sport, such as basketball. Basketball kids need body control, high speed bursts, and an ability to repeatedly absorb and redirect forces that get applied when jumping & landing. If cross-country training is done in a better way, fast & speedy, versus long & slow, the XC athlete can be better prepared for hoops season, and keep their speed, not lose it.

In other countries, kids have nothing else to do but run. Take the Kenyans. They have no buses, and have to literally run to school every day, through hills, rough terrains, and mountains. It is no wonder they dominate endurance events!

We in America drive our kids to school in an SUV, because we can't let them ride the bike to school, afraid that it will be stolen! America was for a while, a dominant force on the endurance side of running. Quite frankly, I think we were pretty damn good because we didn't have much else to do! We had the time to run, and develop our systems in doing so. But, as we got lazier, we lost our zest & appeal for the simple sport of running. We lost our edge.

Now, its time to bring back a whole new edge to the sport of running, by changing the mindset on how we train for it in today's youth. We have to take adjustments in our society, and use them to our advantage!

What we can do to fix the problem:

My basic suggestion is to save the long, slow distance work for later on in life, if a young runner ends up moving to longer distances. Since we have such a fast-paced society, we need to take this approach to the training for running. Make it fast, simple, sweet, and to the point! This is also one of the fastest ways to get kids in shape. Many studies have suggested that high intensity interval training, which is training at high speeds with low total volumes of work, can raise both anaerobic and aerobic endurance levels. In fact, one study by Izumi Tabata of Japan showed that a high intensity interval program of just 4 minutes of work, raised the aerobic endurance levels more in highly-trained athletes, than did the typical long & steady endurance method. This study tells me you can do more, in less time, and get more accomplished. I've used this simple strategy in my XC athletes and have increased their fitness levels, based on race-pace VO2 ratings, by 20%, in the course of a season. They were 20% fitter at the end, than they were at the start of it. It's simple & it works.

We also have technology available today to assist us in finding the right training paces for these high intensity runs. We no longer have to go by the measuring wheel & the stopwatch to figure these out. Today's GPS speed monitors help us do the trick in discovering instant running paces & speeds attained while in training. Even graphical data can be downloaded from this technology, to discover how your athletes are affected by any terrain & weather condition. It is an invaluable tool for assessment and training.

With new technology and new studies showing us that we can train smarter, faster, and get in shape quicker, its time we start to develop a new edge in running for today's youth. Running is losing its edge. It is about time we do something about it, and change the way we think about training for the pure sport of running. Let's develop our young runners into something more than just a blur of speed on a track or cross-country course: turn them into real athletes, with a competitive fire that doesn't die!

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