

Fun Runs: High-interest Activities for Distance Running Practices

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Abstract

Keeping distance runners interested in running is a challenge for most high school coaches. Distance running is difficult and it takes effort to give one's all during every workout. This article provides ideas for distance coaches that engage athletes in high-interest run activities.

“Our sport is your sport’s punishment.” Across two decades of coaching, I (Ken) have heard/read this statement many times in reference to distance running. One debate this statement might spark is whether conditioning should be used as a punishment or consequence. The focus of this article is the challenge that coaches of younger distance runners may face in motivating their athletes to enjoy, become passionate about, and commit to distance running.

The topic of dwindling participation numbers and a high dropout rate in youth sports is real (U. S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2019). As noted in the opening paragraph, almost the entire focus of distance running is conditioning. Almost every athlete arrives at the first day of practice already knowing how to run. Admittedly, some will need some tweaks in their running form and some instruction on the rules of racing will need to take place. But overall, conditioning is going to be the key. However, racing every day would lead to exhaustion and overuse injuries. In addition, over time, one’s athletes would likely become bored by constantly racing.

Therefore, it is important for the distance running coach to find ways to include activities at practice that go beyond racing each day, that go beyond the core workouts of intervals, tempo runs, and long runs. Not only should these activities aid in the conditioning process (making time for both

challenging the body and also time for recovery), but they should also be of high interest to the athletes.

What follows in the remainder of this article are a list of suggested activities for distance coaches to include in practice that will do just that: improve conditioning while keeping their athletes motivated. The activities are divided into three categories: practice activities for the track, for trails/parks, and for within the community.

Track

The following activities are meant to take place on a track. However, if you do not have a track available to you, a park with a closed loop will work just as well...maybe even better if you are training for cross country.

Last Person Out

The first of the track-based activities is called Last Person Out. In this activity, you have the entire team run around the track as a group. The coach then blows a whistle, and whoever is the last person in the pack is out. That person then continues running laps in the outside lane in the opposite direction while the main group continues. The whistle is blown periodically until there is only one runner left. Often, the pace of the main group will continue to get faster as the activity progresses. In order to help keep this in check, we have established a rule that no one can be more than 5 meters ahead of or behind the pack.

Even Pace Contest

A second track-based activity is called the Even Pace Contest. In this activity, a specific distance is chosen by the coaches (ex: 800 meters). Then a goal time is selected (ex: 4 minutes). The distance and time are shared with the athletes. Their goal is to be the one

who is closest to the goal time after running the selected distance. A break is given before the next round starts with a new distance and new goal time. There are multiple possible goals in this activity. The original goal, as found in the name, is to have athletes work on accurate pacing. In order to do this, basic, well-known distances will be chosen (ex: 400 meters, 800 meters, 1000 meters). This will help athletes learn what a 90 second 400 feels like. In order to lighten things up, we have started including random distances that are more difficult for the athletes to pace. Whether it is 650 meters in 3 minutes, 100 meters in 58 seconds, or running to that tree and back, this evens the playing field for athletes of all abilities and lightens the mood. The other aspect I like about this activity is that it can be used as either a hard workout or a recovery workout depending on the distances/goal times chosen by the coach.

Glow Stick Relay

The third track-based activity is called the Glow Stick Relay. This is an activity that is fun for the athletes to run at night. We use it at our summer running camp. Three person teams are formed and those three athletes take turns running 400 meters around the track relay-style. We break out glow sticks, use flashlights for batons, and even crank up the music for one hour of running!

Beat Your Mark

The final track-based activity is called Beat Your Mark. In this activity, each runner gets some sort of marker they can run with (ex: a t-shirt, small rock, pine cone, etc...). All runners get on the start line and on the whistle, start running around the track. After 30 seconds, the coach blows the whistle. The runners stop where they are, place their markers on the inside of the track marking how far they have run, and then jog back to the start line. (I have made the rule that all runners must make it at least 100 meters on their first attempt, otherwise, the activity could take all day!) This process continues with the runners having to beat their previous mark each time and moving their marker ahead to that point. Once a runner fails to beat their mark two times, they are out of the game and then continue running laps in the outside lane in the opposite direction while the main group continues. The activity concludes when there is only one person remaining.

Park

The following activities are meant to take place in a city park.

Ultimate Frisbee

The first park-based activity is called Ultimate Frisbee. Wikipedia provides a quick summary of Ultimate Frisbee: "Points are scored by passing the disc to a teammate in the opposing end zone." Other basic rules are that players must not take steps while holding the disc, and interceptions, incomplete passes, and passes out of bounds are turnovers." We also play a version of this game with a football (we call it cross country football). As with many games, I find that athletes are having so much fun while playing that they do not realize how hard they are working.

Speed Frolf

The second park-based activity is called Speed Frolf. Frisbee golf (frolf) is an activity that is growing in popularity. Many city parks are now adding frisbee golf courses. If you have one available, this activity might be a good option for your runners. Rather than use heavier frisbee golf discs, we use regular lighter frisbees. Athletes find a partner and alternate throws as they work their way around the course. This can be used as a continuous run as a slower pace, but we usually break it up and have them complete a handful of holes at a time. They then have some recovery time before attacking the next handful of holes.

Ride & Stride

The third park-based activity is called Ride & Stride. In this activity, athletes alternate running and riding bike with a partner of similar ability. With each pair, one starts on the bike and one starts on foot. The biker rides a designated distance (ex: one mile) and then parks the bike. That athlete then continues on foot to the next mile marker. In the meantime, the athlete who started out on foot runs to the 1-mile mark and gets on the bike left by their partner. They then ride the bike to the 2-mile mark, park the bike, and begin running again. This can be done for varying even-numbered legs. In the above example, if eight total miles are covered, each athlete would have run four miles and biked four miles. If you have access to a pool or swimming area, a triathlon would also be an option.

Green Run

The fourth park-based activity is called the Green Run. For this activity, athletes partner up and run around a park or on a trail picking up trash, placing

it in trash bags provided by the coach, and returning the filled trash bags to a trash can in the park. Over time, I have added instructions to avoid picking up any questionable trash and have also started providing rubber gloves. This is an activity we use at the end of the season to help clean up the park/trail we have used through the season. It serves as a means of service to the community and a way to say thank you for the use of the facility.

Handicap Run

The final park-based activity is called the Handicap Run. The term “handicap” here is used as it is in the golf world...as a means of leveling the playing field. In this activity, we use the results of a two-mile time trial to line up the athletes from slowest to fastest. We then have them go on a two-mile run, allowing the runner with the slowest time to start first. The next runner will be the second-slowest...starting after the first runner by however many seconds they finished ahead of him/her in the time trial. This continues until the winner of the previous time trial has started. In theory, all runners should be finishing at about the same time.

Example:

Time trail results: Runner X – 16:15, Runner Y: 16:30, Runner Z: 17:00

In the Handicap Run, Runner Z would start first, Runner Y would start 30 seconds later, and Runner X would start 15 seconds after Runner Y.

Community

The following activities are meant to take place within a community. While running a practice on city streets comes with its own challenge (safety being the top one!), there are also some benefits to it as well. It is great for your team to be visible out in the community with working hard and having fun.

Scavenger Hunt

The first community-based activity is a Scavenger Hunt. The coach breaks the team up into smaller groups (4-6 runners). Each group is provided with a list of things they need to find. As a running activity, I have found that it works best for the groups to gather information rather than objects. For example, they need to find out how many steps there are on the slide in a certain playground or what business is located at a certain street address. All groups have to return in a certain amount of time to avoid disqualification. The list the coach provides has more things to find than they could likely find in the allotted

amount of time. Also, to avoid groups working together, the items on each list vary, but only slightly. For example, one list might ask for the 3rd word on a sign at a certain address, the next list might ask for the 5th word.

#selfierun

The second community-based activity is an offshoot of the scavenger hunt called #selfierun. The difference between this activity and a scavenger hunt is that one person in each group carries a mobile phone with them. The list they have to complete is of things their group has to take a selfie in front of. For example, a bridge, a swing set, a fire station, or a speed limit sign. Personal disclaimer: This is the only activity included in this article that I (Ken) take credit for developing. The rest were part of our program when I started as an assistant coach or were added as I came across them at coaches’ clinics or in articles such as this.

Rummage Sale Run

The final community-based activity is called the Rummage Sale Run. This is an activity for a Saturday morning, usually as a recovery run after a Friday meet. Each athlete must bring \$1. (I (Ken) usually have a few spare dollars for those who forget.) The athletes then break into smaller groups and run around town for 45 minutes stopping at various rummage sales. The goal is to make the best purchase they can with their \$1. Following the run, we have a contest to see who got the best deal, the most creative item, and the best costume. Other rules include, 1) athletes are never by themselves...always with at least one other team member, 2) athletes cannot pool their money, 3) whatever is purchased must be carried with them, and 4) they must bring their item home (they can’t just leave it at practice).

Conclusion

Hopefully, coaches can adapt, adopt, or tweak these activities and incorporate them into their individual practice plans. In the end, the goal is to make distance running enjoyable for your athletes while still getting them to work hard.

Reference

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. (2019). *National Youth Sports Strategy*. Washington, DC. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.