

COACHES COACHING COACHES

teaching, training, learning

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Editor's Message

Every year, newly graduated college students enter the coaching profession. In most cases, these newly minted coaches have completed at least one coaching course with some earning a coaching minor. But, as every experienced coach knows, no amount of book learning or required college courses can truly prepare one to be an effective coach. There is truly no better way of learning than through experience.

An adage I learned many years ago truly explains how one learns and how one helps the next generation learn.

I do, you watch, we talk.

I do, you help, we talk.

You do, I help, we talk.

You do, I watch, we talk.

And then we each go help the next person

Coaches Coaching Coaches (CCC) is a supplement to Dakota Coach. The purpose of CCC is to provide an outlet for coaches to share coaching knowledge that helps other coaches become better coaches. CCC is interested in all topics related to coaching, for example, skill techniques, game tactics, coaching strategies, practice planning, team and individual psychology, nutrition, culture, first aid, training and conditioning, motivation, parent relationships, practice planning, mental health, leadership, mentoring, and relationships.

To submit an article to Coaches Coaching Coaches, send your article in word format to bradford.strand@ndsu.edu

Brad Strand

Dual Sport Athletes vs. Multi-Sport Athletes: Are They Equally Beneficial?

Benjamin L. Strand, Hillsboro Public School

In my 15 plus years of coaching, I have coached many different activities and sports across multiple age levels. Everything from golf lessons for 5 year-olds all the way to Legion baseball with athletes who were 19 year-olds. In between, there was elementary basketball, junior high softball, boys' basketball, and football, as well as high school baseball, softball, and girls' basketball. Participants' interests in these sports range from, "I just want to be with my friends" to "I want to do whatever it takes to be the best". At the upper levels, my goal is to help athletes become the best in many things, especially in facing adversity, dealing with hardships, and handling pressure.

I have coached mainly for three communities; Hatton, ND (population 783), Northwood, ND (population 713), and Hillsboro, ND (population 1,601). Some of these have been summer recreation activities, some of these teams have been school teams, and some co-op teams for Hatton-Northwood and Hillsboro-Central Valley. Within communities of these sizes, it is very common for student-athletes to take part in a plethora of activities, including non-sport activities but also playing in three sports throughout the year.

Since I started teaching for the Hillsboro School District, it has been fun to follow the youth that I have taught and coached participate in other sports that I have no affiliation with. I often think, does wrestling help my Babe Ruth catcher? What skills is he taking from season to season without even knowing? What aspects of volleyball is my starting varsity center learning to take into basketball season?

I am currently the head baseball coach for the Hillsboro-Central Valley Burros. In the spring season, students are not only multi-sport athletes having participated in

football or cross country in the fall, basketball or wrestling in the winter, and then coming to me for baseball; but some are also dual-sport athlete during a single season. For example, playing baseball at the same time as track/field or golf.

This paper seeks to answer two questions that have concerned me during my coaching experiences, 1) Is it good for athletes to be in multiple sports that span across the school year? and 2) Are there different outcomes for athletes who are dual-sport athletes instead of being a multi-sport athlete?

Dual-Sport Athletes

Dual-sport athletes are not as common as multi-sport athletes in our school district. However, at the junior high level, students want to try and continue with multiple sports before "giving up" on one of them to pursue their best fit. Our school requires students to put priority on their team sport, and expect them to work on their individual sport during their own time or when their team sport has the day off. This works okay with cross country, track/field, and golf. When I say it works "okay", I mean it works well enough for the kids to participate in both activities, but in my opinion, they are not going to thrive in either.

According to Stankovich (2014), "There are several factors that have contributed to the new, two-sport student-athlete, including the following:

- Student-athlete interest – with more opportunities to play sports, some student-athletes are embracing these opportunities.
- Similar to the previous point, increasingly more sports leagues, showcases, camps, and clinics are now available, making it much easier

to find ways to play sports seven days a week.

- Parents unaware of issues and complications relating to greater sports intensity, including sports burnout and increased risk for physical injuries. Without this awareness, some parents might be at risk for encouraging kids to play a second sport in the same season.
- Some parents may falsely believe that the odds of their child earning a full-ride athletic scholarship dramatically increase by playing a second sport during the same season, but this has not been supported through research” (Stankovich, 2014).

In my experience, I believe that dual-sport student-athletes experience overtraining, stress, and burnout. I also see athletes giving 50 percent to each of the sports they are dual-sporting. Lastly, I see a huge disparity in their growth in tactical and technical skills, because they are not at all practices and games to learn situations, sport intricacies, strategy, and skill development sessions.

Multi-Sport Athletes

Multi-sport participation is very common in our district, as well as many of the surrounding communities. Youth get a chance to experience the different opportunity each sport offers to the fullest. Most sports have time between to recover (unless the team advances to the state tournament) and athletes have the ability to rest their bodies before preparing for the upcoming season.

More and more research indicates the being a multi-sport athlete is more positive than negative. According to Eytel, “30 of the 32 first round picks in the 2017 NFL draft were multi-sport athletes” and shared that being a multi-sport athlete helps in “developing different skills – typically athletes who participate in multiple sports have the ability to develop skills that complement other sports. For example, if a football player runs track or plays

basketball, he can further improve his footwork and hand-eye coordination. Although footwork and hand-eye coordination are not the same, understanding how to use those body parts makes it easier for athletes to improve in all sports” (Eytel, 2019).

Eytel affirms my thoughts of my student-athletes participating in wrestling becoming a better catcher in baseball because of his skills gained during the wrestling season. Core and lower body strength, sliding on his knees, toughness, grit, flexibility. These are all gained on the mat and carried out to the baseball field. She also drives home the point that young athletes experience burnout when they specialize in one sport, saying “for most athletes, being pushed to play year round can cause them to lose the passion they once had” (Eytel, 2019). The same sentiment is expressed by Smith (2016), multi-sport athletes have fewer overuse injuries, less opportunity for emotional burn-out, exposure to different kids, exposure to different roles, and not putting your eggs in one basket.

Are They Comparable?

Dual-sport and multi-sport participation are comparable in many ways. In both scenarios, student-athletes are given the chance to participate in many roles, compete in different settings, compete with different peers, and learn different skills from different coaches. The obvious main difference is that in dual-sporting, athletes are doing the aforementioned things at the same time, where multi-sport athletes are doing one at a time.

I do believe, however, that coaches and parents need to allow the youth to decide for themselves what sports they would like participating in. Whether that being dual-sport when in elementary or junior high, the student-athletes need a chance to try things and decide what they are passionate about, what suits their abilities, and what they want to dedicate time to. O’Sullivan (2019) talked about early specialization saying “in a nutshell, early specialization should be avoided because it is not necessary for elite

performance, and it is potentially harmful...the sampling period is not incidental to the development of great performers – something to be excised in the interests of a head start – it is integral.” Giving children a chance to sample sports takes place in both dual-sport and multi-sport setting.

Is One More Beneficial Than the Other?

After considering both, it appears that being a multi-sport athlete is more beneficial for a student-athlete as opposed to being a dual-sport athlete. There is less chance for burnout, more chance for skill development/skill retention, and when done properly and at the correct time, more chance for students to find their niche for what sport best suits them.

Conclusion

Both dual-sport and multi-sport participation provide a large range of positives for student-athletes. Both provide youth a chance to take part in different environments and challenge themselves in different situations. They can both give youngsters a chance to try out a range of athletic skills and movements to hone in what their passion is. Both are a better option than specializing in one sport.

It takes a special type of athlete to perform as a dual-sport performer at a high school or college level, while doing both well. Children doing this at the elementary or junior high level helps them sample different sports before choosing their passion for high school. Dual-sport participation at the highest level (either high school or college)

can lead to burnout, as well as resulting in athletes giving less than their full capability to either sport.

Multi-sport participation is the best bet for a happy medium between specializing in one sport and finding your child/athlete burning out. Multi-sport participation gives kids the option to sample different sports and allows them to give full effort and focus during the specific season.

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Developing a Coaching Philosophy

Jim Dooley, Beulah Public School

Tom Osborne was the “passing guru” of the early 1970s Nebraska Cornhuskers teams. Then head coach Bob Devaney, who was a run the ball straight ahead kind of guy, said “It is a lot easier to want to throw the ball as an assistant coach than it is as a head coach.”

That is completely true... at least for those of us who love to “run the dang ball!” It was certainly true in Nebraska, as the “passing guru” Osborne was later considered the last of the old dinosaurs in the 1990s for his heavy run first philosophy until the end of his career.

My background came from the fact that I never played for a football team that had a winning record. Never. Not in high school, not in college. I played for two teams that went winless during the season. In every respect - we threw the ball more than our opponents- whether we were Run & Shoot, BYU Spread (basically a version of the “West Coast Offense... the one that has its roots in Cincinnati), Multiple I or confusion offense - we were always beaten by our league champion who almost always ran a 3 back power or option offense. I took note of that.

Right around the time I was finishing up as a player and beginning my coaching career, Bob Wagner was winning games at Hawaii, of all places (not known previously to be a football power) by running something called the “Hawaii Run & Shoot”. It basically took some principles of the run & shoot, (which I had recently learned as a player), and mixed them with an option offense, much like the service academies run now out of the flexbone look. Bob Wagner and assistant Paul Johnson (who later coached at Navy before finishing at Georgia Tech) were basically the start of that “breaking of the wishbone”; it has the same run plays, but added more of a passing threat.

So “spread option” (not to be confused with the modern spread option) is where I started.

I break down my career into four offensive “eras”:

- 1991-1993 Idiot Era (tried to run the Hawaii Run & Shoot... did so very unsuccessfully, then went to variations of the I formation... all with similar results)
- 1994-2002 Wishbone Era
- 2003-2004 Confusion Era (we were 17-5 during this time, so not bad, just lacking in continuity)
- 2005-present Single Wing Era

When I started, I knew everything - especially how to get beat a lot. After being a head coach right out of the gate in 1991, my teams went 1-22. I took an assistant coaching job in 1994 and learned more in three days than all the football knowledge I had accumulated previously. Perhaps it wasn’t as much football knowledge as it was football philosophy. I knew the game, but not the applications of the game.

Gary Walling, who was the head coach at Bloomfield, Nebraska (home of the “Bees”) is a mentor, friend, and the man most responsible for my career having any direction other than down the sewer. I learned a ton from other football coaches, coaches in other sports and people in all walks of life and various vocations. But my time with Coach Walling made me realize that I really knew nothing and needed to pay attention.

I have outlined what I value and find necessary in a program. In some cases, my core beliefs may be contrary to someone else’s (especially in terms of scheme). Regardless of that, however, I do find value in assessing these areas (and continually

reassessing them) so your program and your career have direction. You can't get there if you don't know where to go.

On the Field

Overall

At his introduction as USC's new football coach in 2001, Pete Carroll said "It's all about the ball."

I completely agree with this statement and have made it a point, wherever I have been, to make it "all about the ball". On offense we want to keep the ball away from you. On defense we want to take the ball from you. Our Special Teams' philosophy on returns is "we snap the ball next." Whether from our own one yard line or on an extra point, I really don't care (extra point would be better though). I want the ball. I don't want to punt it to you and I don't want to get a roughing the punter penalty for trying to block a punt. I just want the ball.

Anatoly Tarasov, the father of Russian (Soviet) hockey and in my opinion one of the greatest coaches ever, regardless of sport, endorsed this principle as well. It was all about the puck. I have heard many interviews with people who played against the Soviet Red Army teams who employed Tarasov's tactics- a recurring theme was "frustration" and not being able to get control of the puck. "It was like they were playing 'keep-away'", several said.

This is what we want to do.

Offense

I heard this once at a clinic- Out of these five offensive attributes in high school football: Power Run, Option Run, Misdirection Run, Short/Quick Passing Game and Deep Passing Game- you need to be solid at two to be competitive, three to be good, and four to be great. If you have all five you will be outstanding.

I agree with that to a point: in 2015 when we won a state title, we could very capably do all five and did all five in the state championship game. In 2019 we probably

were close, but then lost our QB before the playoffs and could only really do two of those items well (both running... we completed one pass in three playoff games. We attempted seven in three games.) In other years we have been good at two or three attributes and below average at the others... but still had successful seasons (albeit, no state titles). If you have a "five tool" offense, you will be tough to beat. But if you have some of the right tools, you can still be very good and I believe win a title... (Which I have seen... but haven't been able to completely prove myself, though we have played in championship games while lacking some tools). Knowing which tools you have and/or can develop is important too. Trying to be "five tool" when you are "three tool" will cause you to lose games you shouldn't (see: us in 2021).

I like to be different. As far as I know, no team in North Dakota runs what we run. When you practice against us, you must practice specifically for us. This coming year, we play about six teams that are similar in their offensive alignment. They each emphasize different things, but as far as reads, keys and coverage, we are in pretty much the same thing each week. That gives us an advantage.

The potential disadvantage- they know what we will do on defense... and I have no real idea what we will see from their defense. However, true as that is, I tell our players "If they run something different than they normally do at us, we have probably seen it before; they haven't done it before... so we know it better than they do."

Defense

We want as much of a catch all as we can have; a "bend but don't break" philosophy. We are not a "big play" defense (though we've had many big plays that is not the aim).

We have basically been a 4-3 team with some adjustments and updates. We've changed our main coverage over the years to go from seeing more power and option to spread option, passing and now RPO (run-pass options) oriented attacks.

Several years ago, we actually added in a 3 man front (took out a DL and brought in an “athlete”, who could serve multiple purposes). Depending on the season and personal, we will run that more than occasionally. We also have some background in Buddy Ryan’s “Bear” defense, (and I hate to name drop here, but this is kind of a cool story) which came from a chance meeting in 1999 with Jeff Fischer who was coaching the Tennessee Titans. Fischer had played in Ryan’s Bear defense and put me in touch with Buddy’s son Rex (who at the time was at the University of Cincinnati). Rex was more than gracious with information and we dabbled in that a bit for a few years as well. We still use some concepts from that.

Aside from the “bend but don’t break” philosophy, I want my guys to play fast. The only way to do that is to know your responsibility inside and out. At this point, we can work on our opposition’s schemes and systems so we can get fast recognitions against their plays. We might be in the same front and the same coverage the whole game... and yes, the opponent (especially the coaches) know that. However, if our guys are doing their job, we believe that excellence within our system will overcome the “lack of an element of surprise”, if you will. We know what we are doing. If we know what you are trying to do- and we do our own jobs, we should be tough to beat.

Final Thoughts

These, in a nutshell are our (really my) football scheme philosophies. One great thing about the game is that someone can completely disagree with me, and run a system almost contrary to what we do, and have success.

The key to all of this is being able to “sell” your program and your schemes. I have a former assistant who is taking over a head coaching position this fall. He is running our systems at his new job. One bit of advice I gave him is to be prepared for the nay-sayers. What we do is weird. It isn’t seen on Sundays or Saturdays... “no one else” does it (which is not true as I could name several successful programs across the country who run something similar to what we do). It (our

offense at least) is a hard sell. However, if I tried to run something else here now, our players would likely revolt. You must stay committed when commitment is necessary.

You also need to accept sometimes it is time to bail on (or at least adjust) a particular system. When we switched offenses or defenses, it wasn’t done lightly. We were good (6-7 wins a year) and it is tough to take a chance to be great when you might just become worse.

I’ll be honest, I may have never changed to our current offense if I had a healthy quarterback in week 6 of the 2005 season. Once I lost three guys to injury, we had to do something. Fortunately, I had been studying our Single Wing offense since 1998... but it took almost seven years to implement it. Looking back, I wish I would have done so sooner.

As I get in to this next section it is less about football scheme and more about the educational components of football in a high school setting. I have a responsibility to teach- and though the game has changed significantly at the higher levels (Division I college and NFL), I still maintain that despite the fact that football at those levels is “entertainment”, it still has within it the need for structure, need for discipline and need for learning. I think that many at those higher levels miss that. Chuck Noll of the Pittsburgh Steelers (4 titles in 6 years) considered himself a “teacher”. Paul Brown, Vince Lombardi, Bill Walsh... even Bill Parcells and Bill Belichick are teachers. Maybe I don’t follow the game enough now, but it seems we have more experts at schemes or analytics than we have teachers. If that is true, then that is sad.

Program Expectations

This is sometimes a hard one for parents to accept, but we stress that everything in our program is “**earned, not given**”. That phrase is in our locker room, it is in our weight room. The entitlement of the 21st century passes over us. It might be passing constantly like a vulture, but we choose to ignore it.

In schools a promotion to the next grade occurs because a student became a year older. This does not happen in our program. It should happen - because by the time someone is a junior or senior, they have either bought in or dropped out. But sometimes even we have our “hangers on”.

I tell players and parents that while certain rights can be attained by being older-playing time is not one of those. A senior is entitled to: graduating sooner, being able to be in the military, go to a bar (legally), run for congress, get an AARP card, and get social security... but they are not entitled to be on the field based on age or year in school.

Perhaps that is unfair and perhaps I am forgetting that my own high school experience was one where only juniors and seniors played on the varsity team when I was a senior. We had a new coach and I think he wanted to bring along the sophomores slowly and win games at their level. It worked, but I always wondered if we could have been better than 4-6 if we just had a few (like 15) of those talented sophomores.

Another thing we really emphasize is to lead by doing. A lot of people can talk a good game. Go see Facebook or twitter if you don't believe me. “What you do speaks so loudly, I cannot hear what you say.” (Emerson... well a paraphrase at least) I say this so often at practice that by the third word the players are responding in unison like a responsive reading in church, but the point must be emphasized. If you want to play, want opportunities, or want to be all state or play beyond high school- show it. Stop talking and start doing. There is a difference between activity and achievement. Find that difference.

Finally (and I talk about this in the last section, The Journey and the Process), we must have a group who is committed to something larger than themselves. We don't want divas. We don't want “me first” guys. We want... we need people who are willing to do what we ask to the best of their abilities. I've had many players over the years with talent. I have had many without much ability whatsoever. Obviously, the talented

ones will make you better, but those untalented ones can maybe make you stronger.

We've had a lot of guys who I looked at as freshmen and have said “if he ever plays for us, we will not win a game that season.” Not only have we won games, but have won region or state titles with those guys. Some of those guys became all-state players or earned college scholarships to play football.

At our level, I care less for untapped potential than I care about willingness to be selfless and do a job. If you can't do what we ask- we will work with you until you can. If you won't do what we ask- you will be replaced. Another phrase I throw around often is “Guys... we gotta' change the people or we gotta' change the people.” In other words, do what we need you to do- or we can find someone else. As for a real application of this- I have probably started more offensive linemen who weigh 170 pounds or less than anyone who is not coaching 6 player football.

Athlete Expectations

We have 5 core expectations:

1. Be on time- My watch is five minutes ahead. We go by that.
2. Do your job- Regardless of notoriety from outside the team, we know all jobs are important.
3. Be accountable- Take responsibility for your training, your preparation and your efforts.
4. Trust your teammates- This relates closely with #2 “Do Your Job”, Do YOUR job, not somebody else's job. Trust them to do what they are supposed to do while you do what you are supposed to do.
5. Play hard.

Core Values: E + R = O; Control the Controllables

E + R = O

Some people (I think of a specific sportswriter here) have negative responses to this equation because they point out that not all “Events” are created equal. In the

real world, some kids wake up in the morning with no food to eat or go to bed at night having suffered at the hands of those who are supposed to care for them. In the real world the deck is stacked for or against kids due to socioeconomic factors, heredity, the stability of their homes, health issues, and many other factors.

These are fair but shortsighted points. For me as a coach I don't discount the E; I can't. We all get different E's. For some events we have no control; but once it is an event, only by going back in time could that be changed. E's are basically a "Hobson's Choice" - Take this or nothing. This is the point where we each get to take control of our own situations; to say a bad event leads to a bad outcome is to deny the presence of free-will and to encourage excuse making and blaming of others.

After 30 years of coaching, I have seen some awful Es get turned in to some great Os simply because of the response. I have seen some awful Es ruin people too, but what I have never seen is bad (self-depreciating, selfish, blaming others, accepting being a victim) responses work for any kind of positive outcome.

I don't think anyone in their right mind (that might be the key phrase right there) would discount events and their impact on people. But to give the event any power beyond "where I am right now", steers us to the victim's mentality. Blaming others might get some relief or reparations... but that will get just enough so you will always need those you've now empowered because they (and the "events they have caused") rule over you more than the response- which is yours.

When I tell kids to focus on the response, I am telling them that, "We are down 35-7 at half. We don't have a time machine to go back and change that. Control what we can and show everyone that we are a better team than what we have shown up to now".

I did not expect to win 36-35 and then win the region. And I don't expect to win many games down 28 at half. But I also don't ever expect us to blame the officials, my poor play calling, their teammates, or a

system that made us, a small rural school, have to play a larger private school, from the second largest city in the state, to win a league title. There is a lot we can complain about, but complaining "ain't gonna feed the bulldog".

By the way, the above scenario was not a hypothetical. It happened in 2019.

I will never tell a kid from a horrible situation that he will be successful if he just works hard. But I can and do tell them they won't be successful if they don't work hard. Former Ohio State football coach Woody Hayes said "The great thing about football is that you learn, when you get knocked down, get up!"
The "R" is really just "Get up."

Controlling the Controllables

E + R = O is really just a catchy way of saying control what you can control. At various stages of my life I have tried to control what I could not. My height (or lack thereof), for example was a source of great agitation well in to early adulthood.

What I found is that it didn't matter how angry I became or how I raged and railed against my fate- I never got taller. One great story that everyone in our program hears each year about "controlling the controllables" is the story of Lauren Hill. In the spring of 2014 during her last semester of high school, Hill received an offer to play at Mount St, Joseph's University in Cincinnati, Ohio, only to be diagnosed with terminal brain cancer a short time later. Faced with a future no young person should ever have to contemplate, she was forced to re-evaluate and restructure her goals. Her new goal became "Play one more game"

Her first question to doctors after her diagnosis was, "Can I still play basketball?" In an interview, she explained, "I wanted to wear that jersey and feel like a superhero again, because that's what I feel when I put on the jersey."

The NCAA agreed to move her college's first game up by two weeks so she could play and, during that November game, Hill made

the first basket of the NCAA season in front of a sold-out arena of over 10,000 people at Xavier Univ., where the game had been moved (from a gym seating less than 2000) to accommodate the crowd. Hill played in four games, scoring 10 points. Too weak to finish the season, she stayed on as an honorary coach for the season.

She died in April 2015. Before she passed away, she left this message:

“I encourage everyone to cherish every moment with no worry about the past or anxiety about the future. Because the next moment is never promised. Never leave anything unsaid. I have learned to see the blessings in every moment and through every struggle, no matter how tough it might be. Nothing holds me back from living my life and chasing my dreams. I always finish what I start and see it through to the end. Never give up on your dreams. Find something to fight for; I fight for others.”

- Lauren Hill, Mount St. Josephs

Lauren Hill controlled only that which she could control. In a vein of the $E + R = O$... she had a terrible E in the equation, one I can't even imagine. And yes, she could have dwelled on that bemoaned her fate quietly for a while until she died.

Or Lauren Hill could have done exactly what she did, made the most out of her Response (Controlling the Controllable), and played in front of 10,000 people, and impacted an old coach and high school football team in North Dakota (among countless others) to a point of where I will remember and share her and her story as long as I live or have a memory.

THAT is leaving a legacy. That is to do something heroic that serves others and has real impact on life.

Purpose/Mission

Provide Hope and Opportunity

In my own life I became a pragmatist pretty early in my college football career as I realized that my size and ability level did not

reach my passion for the game. I suppose I was meant to coach.

I now have (and even then, had) many delusional players. Having ambition is a good thing. Having the Socratic wisdom to “Know Thyself” is a better thing.

I've seen that stance maligned, as Cambridge Philosophy Professor Bence Nanay wrote: Knowing thyself is an obstacle to acknowledging and making peace with constantly changing values. If you know thyself to be such-and-such a kind of person, this limits your freedom considerably... A caterpillar who seeks to know himself would never become a butterfly.'

Unfortunately, Nanay misses the point—a caterpillar who doesn't know himself will try to fly too soon and die before becoming a butterfly. This is essentially what coaching is—taking the caterpillar and expecting him or her to become a perpetually better caterpillar. Once there is more development—we can work on becoming a butterfly.

Don't misunderstand, I also agree with such statements as “If people aren't laughing at your dreams...then they aren't big enough!” (Grayson Marshall), and maintain “knowing one's self” is not contrary to Henry David Thoreau's line from Walden “In the long run, men hit only what they aim at. Therefore, they had better aim at something high.” Perhaps “Know thy constantly evolving self” is a better phrase.

Still, you can't reasonably ask a fish to climb a tree or expect a sloth to outrun anything, and yet I see this in coaching often. I've been guilty of such unreasonableness myself.

Many years ago, I was coaching with a former Division I football player who spent a little time in the NFL (and likely would have spent much more if not for a career ending injury). I remember once at practice he was coaching defensive backs and our guy kept messing up. Finally, he lined up and said “watch!” This coach then backpedaled, turned and ran covering the receiver, leaped

up what seemed like five feet off the ground and batted the ball away.

“THAT is how you play the route!” he said in a bit of a huff.

No one said anything.

That is until we got back to the office.

I then said “Man that was impressive. It was an amazing play. But you know we don’t have anyone on our team who can do that.”

He looked at me... kind of puzzled.

I continued “You have to be able to coach me to make that play... and I can’t do any of what you just did.”

A few years later he became a head coach at a neighboring school and remained in coaching through his retirement two years ago. We still talk several times a year and that story comes up now and again. He always said that moment gave him a new perspective.

It was much like when I discovered it is not natural to want to collide with other people or objects. I had a hard time coaching physicality because it never occurred to me crashing in to someone was unnatural. I always thought it was fun as a kid. This might explain why I rode a tricycle down the steps as a two-year old. Twice (same result both times- not good).

The bottom line to all this, all quotes and anecdotes aside, is as a coach I feel it is vital to find out ways to make players successful regardless of their skill set. I can’t ask a 150 lb. player to routinely block a 240 lb. player, but I can ask him to use his quickness, angles, intellect in using our line calls and teammates to get that player blocked.

I can’t ask a 5’ 6” defensive back to get a jump ball with a 6’ 5” receiver, but I can have him learn to jam, reroute, be physical and not care about pass interference penalties to greatly improve his chances.

Just the other day one of our coaches was asking about how we want to play our

nose guard (reads, keys, techniques, etc.). The simple answer is “it depends who we have playing there”.

The Journey and the Process

The journey or the process is the intrinsic value. The accolades, awards, titles are occasional byproducts of that.

I remember reading a line from Theodore Roosevelt “Far and away the best prize that life has to offer is the chance to work hard at work worth doing.”

Football, perhaps more than any sport is a bit under attack now. People are worried about injuries- not just knees and hips (both of which I’ve had replaced or repaired), but head injuries- CTE and long term brain damage. To be fair, for those who play the game- football- much like life- sometimes must be endured. There are no guarantees and one can be injured coming home from the grocery store just as one can be injured on 4th and one.

So, to say that football can cause injuries is fair. To say only that is irresponsibly unfair. I realize that I am biased, but while great things can be learned in all sports, probably because of the intensity, the threat of peril and the distinct differences from one position to another, the nature of football has within it some opportunities that not found or are only partially found in other sports.

Brigadier General Robert Neyland (who fought in two World Wars and coached football at the University of Tennessee for 21 years, winning a national title) called football a “war game”. In other words, it is a game to simulate strategies, pressures and the mix of brute force with intellectualism without the consequences of war.

Having read on war and football throughout my life, I’ve drawn a conclusion that football has one main quality that most other sports do not (at least not to the same extent): Football is a game where service is built in as a requirement for success. If I work for another we succeed, I work solely for myself, we do not.

A great pitcher can shut out another team, a great shooter can go for 50 points and lead his or her team to victory, and a great goalie can stop every shot. A great receiver won't do a thing if no one can get him the ball, a great quarterback won't do anything without blocking or receivers who get open and make catches. A great lineman... well no one notices that anyway.

Unlike other games where everyone may touch the ball and have a chance to score (or be the primary one to stop a score), football has 45% of the offensive players who are not allowed to touch the ball once it is put in to play (except for certain unusual circumstances). And if a defensive player gets the ball- it is because of a mistake that lasts exactly one play- then it goes right back to the offense. Basically, at most five of twenty-two people on the field are considered "immediate threats to score".

Football is a game where talent and ability are important, but those take a back seat to unity, cohesion and cooperation. Knowing your job and doing your job are more important than making fantastic plays. I have thousands of examples of this, but one that comes to mind is a player I had over twenty years ago - Andrew.

Andrew was a senior and a backup quarterback. He played a little, but never started a high school football game. Due to several suspensions for a game, I had almost no defensive linemen. Andrew agreed to play Nose Guard. The team was skeptical, to say the least. I usually don't do a lot of "rah-rah" type speeches... but we needed one. Throughout my ranting I mentioned Andrew and said he would make a play that would win the game. I am not a prophet... except I was.

Andrew was mauled as if by an angry bear nearly all game, but in the end and with a slim lead, he sacked the opposing quarterback. That play started a chain of events that basically lead us to an improbable win, which lead us to a winning streak that landed us in the playoffs.

The process - do your job, trust your teammates, play hard and get up when you

are knocked down- this is something that can sustain someone through football, but also through life.

Mike Singletary said of football "That feeling of being in the locker room, with the team, of men that you can share your lives with, and live and die for... if that's something that's not good for you... as I look at our world today... what is? What is?"

This is essentially the encapsulation of what I value and promote in our program. It is something bigger than the individual boys who enter in to it. It is something bigger than the young men who leave it. It is bigger than the players, the coaches, the school and the community, though it is part of all of us. "The program" is not perversely glorified like it is in a lot of sports movies- it is a chance to be a part of something, to contribute to something that will hopefully sustain others, as it sustained ourselves.

In short, "...as you go into battle, remember your ancestors and remember your descendants." -Publius Cornelius Tacitus

Servant Mentality

"Everybody can be great...because anybody can serve. You don't have to have a college degree to serve. You don't have to make your subject and verb agree to serve. You only need a heart full of grace. A soul generated by love." - Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

Our program is dictated by service. I realize we aren't perfect and sometimes it looks contrary- but we emphasize this value daily.

When I came to Beulah, there was discord. Seniors did not respect freshmen; freshmen feared (loathed) seniors. Look, I'll be the first to admit, the freshmen get on my nerves, but we want them to be valued in the program. All of us serve. We take turns cleaning up the locker room, we take turns taking out equipment. We share the responsibilities like it is a commune- and while I am neither a hippie nor a communist, taking something from those groups by working for the communal good by being a servant leader is what makes us successful.

The ambition is lofty- true synergism- that takes us beyond the sum total of our parts to make us the best we can possibly be. We aim to develop players and people that serve and make an impact in our respective communities by being great, because as Dr. King said “everybody can be great...because anybody can serve”.

In a commencement speech at California Maritime, Dr. Rick Rigsby told a story about ten time national champion Coach John Wooden as UCLA sweeping his floor before practice. Rigsby concluded his point with

this: “You want to make an impact? Find your broom.”

As important as training, nutrition, film study, technique work, etc. are in our football program, “finding our broom” and then using it are what we are really all about.

About the Author

Jim Dooley is a weight training and physical education teacher and the head football coach at Beulah High school, Beulah, ND.

Seeing is Believing

Craig Pool, Maple River

Volleyball is a visual motor game, with an emphasis on the visual. I, like many coaches wish I knew then what I know now. When I first started coaching, I focused on teaching sport skills and athletes being in the correct location. My favorite chant from the bench was anticipate! I thought that if athletes visually followed the ball, the ball would never lie.

But I eventually realized seeing the game is perhaps THE most important skill in volleyball, and one that often gets overlooked. If coaches can train their players to see, they will realize that the game actually slows down enough where they can truly utilize the Read defense.

Eye-work is needed for most skills. But what are athletes watching and are they using their eyes or turning their heads? They also need to communicate what they see.

Volleyball coaches spend a significant amount of time training their blockers to have good eye-work. While this is important, virtually all skills in volleyball require good eye-work.

- As a passer you need to see the server, and see the action of the ball.

- To be a great hitter you must have good vision. Hitters have to see the set, make adjustments, see the block, locate the holes, and hit with range.

- Defenders must see the pass, the setter, the set, and the hitter (Ball, Setter, Ball, Hitter). Good blockers will start to see different types of passes (on, off over, and tight), and make decisions based on tendencies.

Blocking and Individual Defense

Eye-Work

Ball, Setter, Ball, Hitter is the eye-work sequence we like to use for our blockers and back row defenders.

The "ball" is referring to the pass. There is a huge correlation between the type of pass and the set location. Poorly passed balls almost always get set outside. As it turns out, medium passed balls almost always get set outside. It takes your blockers/defenders a split second to recognize/see the pass. This will give our pin blockers a chance to preset and be ready. Our middles have to really key on the setters and their tendencies. You must teach your athletes to quickly see the pass, then move their eyes to the setter.

Seeing the "setter" is the next step in the eye sequence. Once your defenders see the pass, they move their eyes to the setter. I like to tell my athletes this... "If you're late seeing the setter, you're late blocking." Players can get a lot of information from the setter based on his/her movements and tendencies. Do they like to run forward and "throw" the ball back? Do they like to set quicks on a medium pass? Do they set virtually ALL medium passes outside? Do they like to dump? These are the types of tendencies that you are looking for when scouting a setter.

Next is seeing the set. Because hitters tend to hit where the set takes them, this is an extremely important step. Blockers and back row defenders must see the set and position themselves accordingly. Inside sets result in a cross-court hit. Sets tight and to the line will end up being hit down the line (these are strong tendencies). Blockers should see the set and position themselves based on these tendencies.

Last is seeing the hitter. Are they coming in full speed? What is their angle of approach? Do they look like they are going to tip? Seeing the hitter is vital for both blockers and back row defenders.

Eye-work is Scouting

Having great eye-work can help any team dramatically during a match. Because of the way our volleyball seasons are organized, you are often competing against teams you have never seen play. However, if you follow the general rules below, and have good eye-work, your team can be effective without having a specific game plan.

1. Most hitters (almost always) hit where the set takes them. If your blockers know where the set is, your initial defensive game plan is in place.

2. Hitters will hit in their line of approach. In other words, they will hit the same direction that they are running. This can be helpful when blocking middle blockers, who will approach from different areas on the court depending on rotations. Your players can get this information during the "hitter" phase of their eye-work.

BHSBH ? You can consider adding a step to the blocking sequence. We call this ball, hitter, setter, ball, hitter. The defenders will take a quick look at the hitter before seeing the setter. Especially if we are trying to key on the teams primary offensive weapon. We all know that 60+% of balls are going to her. This is an extra step that can help your blockers/defenders recognize where the quick hitter is coming from/going. For example, you may be able to detect a slide hitter earlier by adding this step.

Lastly, don't overlook your back row players. Their eye sequence is just as important as the blockers. I expect them to have the greatest vision and highest level of communication. They can see early and assist the blockers. Because of their location they have the greatest view without a lot of head movement.

Seeing in Serve Receive

Our passing key is "see the server, see the spin." I like to say "see the server, see the spin EARLY." We see a lot of passers who are reacting to a serve far too late. You must teach your passers to see early. We always talk about watching the toss and contact. The velocity of their arm swing does dictate the speed and depth of the ball. I try to get my players to pick a panel to guide their focus. At times I have used some of our older balls and numbered the panels then call them out, anything to increase their focus. Next if we can move our feet to get the ball as close to their mid-line as possible, we can then make adjustments with their arms/hands. Remember, it's faster to make subtle adjustments with our arms than it is with our bodies.

Covering Tips

Covering tips is a common problem and we all try to assist the players, but by the time we do it, it can be too late. The first thing you need to do is determine where most balls go in your match. It may be that you need to move your defensive corners up if the level of play is low and tips are frequent. I use a 2 by 1 base set, 2 steps in from the line, 1 step back from the 3 meter line. However, the single best way to combat tips is with good eye-work and communication. When athletes begin to see and anticipate, tip coverage can help keep the ball up and our blood pressure down.

Summary

"Volleyball is a visual motor game, with an emphasis on the visual.

Here are a few of the drills we use to get 20/20 sight.

At the beginning of practice, we warm up with the **Pinky thumb drill**: After a player has either tossed or passed the ball, they quickly hold either a pinky or a thumb out. The receiving player must call out the finger they see before they touch the ball. This activity forces them to watch the opposing player and not the ball.

Team drill: We use this to get a true perspective on their sequences. All players are gathered on one side of the court with coaches on the other side. We start with just tossing the ball to the setter, getting them

keyed into watching the ball, then setter. Next, we have the setter hold up a hand or a fist before they catch the ball. Progression is to now look at the hitter. We toss the ball to setter, they hold up hand/fist and then they set the ball to the hitter, and the hitter will do the same before they catch.

Setter training: Have the setter (either back row or front) get to their position. We will have both pin hitters positions filled and one person on the other side of net as middle blocker. First progression is to have the middle blocker hold out hand/fist when ball is in the air being tossed to setter, setter must call it out before they set. Next progression is to have hitter ready to hit and middle blocker ready to cheat early. Setter must set to the opposite direction. In the 1st progression we want the setter to use their eyes without head movement. In the 2nd progression we want them to use their peripheral vision. It's a struggle but they can have success with it.

Hitting lines: During pre-season we will use pool noodles as blocking hands. Set 3-4 noodles up for every position you are hitting from. Have players use their vision to hit

around the noodles. Also use baseball bases to mark out on the floor the locations you want to focus hitting to.

Blind Blocking drill: Primarily for your pin blockers to get in the correct position. Have a pin blocker get into position. Have pin hitters line up transitioned on opposite side of net. Ball will be tossed from behind the blocker. Discuss how you want them to set their block, face up, nose on shoulder, or nose on elbow. Then toss the ball over the net to the approaching hitter. They can wait coiled, read hitter, and get to correct position. This will be rough at first but once they really start to focus, they really read the hitter.

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About the Author

Craig Pool is a retired teacher who continues to coach high school volleyball.

Observations and Thoughts

Brady Schwab, Thompson High School

You are extremely important. There has never been a greater need in our society for you than right now. The influence you can have and the changes you can make on your student-athletes is of vital importance. Without individuals such as yourself who are willing to prioritize the youth you come into contact with, our society will become unrecognizable. So, thank you! Together we can all improve the lives of the youth we have the privilege to work with!

The following are observations and thoughts from 25 years as a parent, teacher, coach, and athletic director. I am sure there are quotes included which I have borrowed through the years and apologize for not giving credit to the individuals who influenced me. I make no claims to be an expert and believe the successes I was fortunate to be a part of were due to trusting administration and exceptional student-athletes who had supportive parental figures. I believe each of the following can be applied to any level of athletics from youth to high school and beyond.

Daily Musts

- Discuss character, discuss mental health, seek input from stakeholders, and be respectful. Practice gratitude and be where your feet are.
- Take time to yourself to debrief and do something for your mind, body, and soul that you enjoy.

Opinions

Q: What is the most important thing about coaching/leading?

A: You improve the life of the individual's you coach.

Q: How do I get to know each participant without crossing boundaries?

A: Communicate daily in season and periodically out of season. Visit about things other than sports such as fishing, snowboarding, their speech meet, classes, etc. They have lives outside of sports, show you care about them as a person as well as a member of your team. Get to know each individual to figure out how you can help them become their best version.

Q: What do participants take away from being on my team?

A: Everything you say, do and how you treat them. How do you want them to remember you? Have them remember there were expectations, follow through and an effort to improve them as a person.

Q: Why do most kids participate?

A: My opinion, most participate to be with friends and part of a team. Some participate for statistics and scholarships, but the majority enjoy the camaraderie and experiences.

Q: How do I keep all players equally invested?

A: Treat all participants with the same respect. Teach and communicate with each individual regardless if they are a star, role player, or practice player. They are all equally important and a member of your team. Some will never make it on the floor or field, but they will remember how you treat them.

Thoughts

Know Your People - *listening is more important than talking*

- *Likes and dislikes* - What do they like/dislike about your sport? What do

they like/dislike about you? Use the information to create a plan to improve each individual.

- *Strengths and weaknesses* - What do they do well and how can it be used to help them/the team improve? What do they need to work on and explain how they can improve it? Help them find the answers, they are young and learning, teach them.
- *Outside of the sport* - What are their hobbies/ interests? What other activities are they in? How can it be used to help them improve? What family/relationship issues are they facing and how do they affect them? Do they have someone to talk to about anything at the school, is it you? If they have no one, it needs to be you!
- *Personal life* - Do they have both parents, a guardian? Do their parent(s)/guardian(s) work multiple jobs? Do the adults in their life attend events? Are they too hard on them? How are they involved in their life?
- *Get to know them* - create a team of individuals who do not want to let you down.

Communicate - *ongoing and always honest*

- *Face to face* - talk daily in season excluding days off, talk periodically out of season if nothing more than a hi and ask how things are going. Discuss unexpected changes prior to making them. I texted the next day's lineup the night before to allow them to digest it so they are ready to help the team the next day.
- *Honesty* - athletics teach life lessons about roles, tough conversations and much more. Talk to participants as if an adult in their lives is listening. A good rule of thumb, if you would not say it to the adults in their life, you should not say it to the individual.

Follow Through - *they remember everything, do not let them down*

- Follow through on everything. If you told them they have Friday off, have Friday off. Bring the Powerade to the kid you promised it to the next day. Following through builds trust. Kids believing you and in you is one of the most important things you can do to build relationships.

Be Empathetic - *each individual is a person, they have a lot going on, care about them*

- Kids have a life outside your sport and a lot going on. Most are invested when they are at practices/contests but turn it off when they leave. Things happen every day that affect their lives, 'read them' daily to see who you need to visit with more than usual and follow through on it.
- I believe empathy and understanding are different. Empathy is sympathizing when a family member is ill, and your player is 'off' for a few days. Understanding means you understand they are struggling in a class and you will do what you can to help them. It is not only their grade, it is our grade too.

Have a Code - *they want and need to know the expectations*

- Simple expectations with real life takeaways. We promote what we permit.
- Minimal expectations that hold everyone accountable. Put them in your handbook and locker room, refer to them and discuss them frequently. The expectations I used: be a good citizen, be genuine, work hard and compete, communicate, do your best.

Have a Plan - *it is hard to steer the ship if we do not know the course*

- Be organized, if a drill calls for 10 minutes, do it for 10 minutes or less. Drills do NOT have to be what you have always done. Explain drills. Multi-purpose drills are better.
- I do not believe in "keep it simple". I believe in keeping it at their level. Every

participant is at a different level, teach it to them at their level.

- Work backwards from the end of the year (what you want them to know). Set dates or checkpoints for what you want each player to be able to do at each check. At the beginning of junior high basketball season, I knew what I hoped to teach by each checkpoint. If you do not get there, adjust your timeline and work on those areas.
- Teach your assistants or fellow coaches to be leaders and how to create and implement a plan.

Model - *they are watching, be someone you want them to become*

- If you want them to work hard, be on time, put in time, and be prepared every day then you must to.
- If you do not want them drinking pop or energy drinks, avoid it yourself during the school day and at practices/games.
- If you want them to respect officials and game workers, model the behavior. Below varsity, the only discussion about officials should be to thank them for working. At the varsity level and beyond, there is a correct way to visit with officials that demonstrates to your student-athletes the correct way to do it.

Change - *be confident but not entrenched*

- Never stop learning. Today's youth are not that much different from the past, how we communicate and interact with them has changed. Understanding how to do this may mean the difference between reaching them or not.

It is "Us/We" - *using the word "you" creates a divide between team and staff*

- "You guys/gals" does not create an inclusive environment. "We all need to do better", is a much better approach.

Winning is a Byproduct - *is it all about winning?*

- Obviously, the end product for a number of us is to win, but how do we get there? At most schools, there are years when it will not happen, do we give up? I would rather continue to build the individual and the program by moving forward and working hard to improve as people and our skills daily.
- Break the practice, game, season into smaller chunks with a part-whole approach. Example: instead of discussing the first quarter, let's break it down into four-minute segments and adjust what needs adjusting at that point. Kids tend to focus on the scoreboard, work to change their mentality to focus on smaller parts.

It is awesome being an athletic leader! It is not a season, team, or year, it is who you are. It is in every fiber of your being. Make it a passion and not a job. It is a calling and it is great! I hope you enjoy it and do it for a long time. Parental and societal guidance is changing, we need more people like you who are willing to teach, model, and lead. I wish you the absolute best of luck and hope that each person who reads this is able to take something away they can use. Never stop learning and embrace your chosen profession as a challenge with many unknown rewards!

Favorite Leadership Books

John C. Maxwell, *The 21 Irrefutable Laws of Leadership*. Applicable to all walks of life.

Sun Tzu, *The Art of Modern Warfare*. Geared more towards varsity and higher level competition.

Pat Summitt, *Reach for the Summit*. Great leadership principles.

About the Author

Brady Schwab is the athletic director at Thompson High School as well as a teacher in the district with over 20 years of experience in HPE and social sciences. He is a former head and assistant coach for the

past 25 years in baseball, basketball, and football. brady.schwab@tps-k12.org.

The ABCs of Roughrider Cross Country

Nathan Stamstad, Southern McLean Roughriders
(Washburn, Wilton, and Wing co-op)

Together with my co-head coach, Laura Tweeten, I have been coaching cross country for the past ten years. Making up the towns of Washburn, Wilton, and Wing, we are a small school. We have averaged nine girls and nine boys each year for these past ten years. In that time, our girls' program has had some success – one west region championship and four top-5 finishes at the state cross country meet. We also had the individual state champion in 2015. Although our boys have not been able to find that success, we are working on ways to make that happen.

I have two young daughters – Olivia (3) and Claire (16 months). Laura has two young grandchildren of her own – Collins (17 months) and Grady (3 months). We read a lot of books to them. Obviously, those books are covering the basics – colors, shapes, numbers, and letters. It is this last category that inspired our presentation at the 2022 NDHSCA Coaches Convention. Together, we came up with something about cross country and our program at Southern McLean for each letter.

The ABCs of Roughrider Cross Country

A – Adaptability. It is important that whatever you learn from other coaches or articles, adapt it to fit your program. It does not make sense for us to treat our program like a class A program, for example. We do not have that many athletes! Adapt what you learn for each athlete and each program. There is no copy and paste.

B – Barriers. Our biggest problem is consistently getting students to join our team. We have had years with only three runners. Together with injuries and illnesses, this is perhaps our biggest barrier to building a successful program.

C – Consistency. Whatever it is that you do, do it consistently. We have four different types of runs – long runs, intervals, tempo runs, and recovery runs. The first three are harder and I call them “workouts.” To improve as a runner, one needs to be consistently hitting each of these workouts – whether that is every week or every two weeks. Michael Jordan did not become Michael Jordan because of one good practice or game. It was because he was consistently practicing and improving. It is no different with cross country.

D – Development. As athletes get older, they can usually handle more mileage. Boys naturally get stronger as they develop – their mileage should follow and they should increase as they get older. Girls can be trickier, yet the track events at the World Championships and the Olympics were not being run by a bunch of 12-year-old girls. So, although girls develop and can get bigger, they still need to run more (to a point) as they get older. I have also found that a girl's diet becomes more important as they get older (compared to boys) – though please be careful with how you teach this!

E – Energy Systems. There are two main ways the body produces energy – anaerobically (without oxygen) and aerobically (with oxygen). The body is mainly

utilizing energy from anaerobic sources for between 10 and 120 seconds. Since cross country races take much longer than that, the primary focus of our training is on developing our aerobic energy systems. Intervals, long runs, and tempo runs are the three main workouts to help us with this.

F – Fun Runs. Cross Country training can be boring. It is an 11-week season and if the runners have been running over the summer, it is that much longer. To break up the monotony, we will occasionally do scavenger hunts, newlywed game runs (where they are paired up and learn as much about each other as possible and we ask them questions when they get back), and relay races. It is a nice way to give athletes a mental break in the middle of the season.

G – Gratitude Circle. We get in a circle and each athlete (and coach) must say one thing they are thankful for. No repeats. Usually, the first time we do this, athletes say basic stuff like, “water” or, “shade.” As we do this more throughout the season, they start to learn that there is a lot of stuff going on in their lives that they can be thankful for. There is always something.

H – Hip Mobility. For a number of years, we had problems with hip-flexor injuries. Since we have incorporated hip mobility drills and exercises as part of our weekly or even daily routines, we have cut down significantly on these types of issues.

I – Intervals. Designed to develop the VO2 Max of an athlete (more on that later), we run intervals. Typically, we do a rotation of 800s, 1200s, and 400s once per week. In a typical week, we will run these on Tuesdays.

J – Jack Daniels (the doctor, not the whiskey). Called the “World’s Best Running Coach” by *Runner’s World* magazine, he really gets into the science behind the sport. I highly recommend his book, *Daniels’ Running Formula* for any new or experience coach. Be warned, there are a lot of tables, graphs, and numbers (which I appreciate, as a math teacher).

K – Killer Hills. We try to run hills early in the season as a specific workout (harder run day). Later in the season, we will incorporate hills into our everyday recovery runs as we have gotten into better shape.

L – Long Run. A very important aspect of our weekly training, we try to do one run per week that is roughly 1.5 times longer than our daily recovery runs. Although this does not get as high as some other schools (7-8 miles), this is still beneficial for helping improve running economy and mental toughness.

M – Milk. Something fun we do for our athletes is provide them with chocolate milk after our workout days. Our booster clubs are great about paying for this. It provides athletes with lots of carbs and protein to help their muscles recover after a harder practice.

N – Nutrition. Lack of knowledge when it comes to fueling one’s body can be extremely detrimental to a young, growing athlete. We do our best to help educate and guide our athletes to make smart choices about what they are putting into their bodies.

O – Open Runs. Think open gyms, but for running. This is our version of summer running. We only do this twice a week starting about a month before the season starts. We are a co-op of class B schools – our athletes are not just runners. We understand that students are going to be gone, on vacation, or working. If they can make it, great! If not, we encourage them to start running on their own before the season starts.

P – PR Hearts. Every time a runner runs a new season best, we give them a PR Heart (PR stands for Personal Record). This gives them a little extra incentive to try and run faster each and every time they race.

Q – Quality vs Quantity. Again, we are a co-op of class B schools. We do not have many students involved in our program. We have to focus on getting good, quality, efforts out of our good, quality athletes. One of our

mottos over the years has been “quality over quantity.”

R – Races. The season is 11 weeks. Some teams will focus solely on training and only race 5-6 times. Others will “race their way into shape” and race 12-13 times (or whatever the max per season is). We are in the middle. We will typically race between 8 and 10 times per season, based on the weather and travel.

S – Swimming. Washburn has an outdoor swimming pool that is open until school starts. So that first week/week-and-a-half of practice, we try to get into it at least twice. It is a great way to give the athletes a break while still increasing their fitness.

T – Tempo Runs. Roughly an 80% sustained effort over the course of about 10-20 minutes (based on the ability of the athlete). Designed to target the lactate threshold of an athlete, these are done once per week, if possible.

U – Unity. Cross country, more than any other sport I have ever played or witnessed, is a family. Everybody is training to do the exact same thing. Everybody’s in it together. It is such a fun sport and those that participate in it have all said the same thing – cross country is a family.

V – VO2. The volume of oxygen that the body can take in and deliver to the working muscles. At different percentages, one can achieve different benefits. There is so much science here – again, I would refer to Dr. Jack Daniels and his book for a much better explanation than I can try to summarize here.

W – Washburn, Wilton, and Wing. The average enrollment of 7-12 students for the past few years is as follows: Washburn – 140, Wilton – 100, Wing – 32. I cannot stress this enough: we are not a big co-op. Our numbers have been growing over the past few years, and maybe that will help our program in the future. More students means it is more likely that athletes have great natural ability. That ss basic mathematics

for you. We are not quite there yet with our numbers.

X – Xtra XC. Here are some of the little things we do that we could not fit in elsewhere: team breakfasts after morning runs, icing in the river after hard workouts, active recovery on scheduled off days. We also do “fire-ups” – runners draw each other’s names before the state meet and get them a goodie bag with all sorts of stuff to help motivate them before the state meet. We exchange them on the bus ride to state.

Y – Yearly Reflection. To do the same exact thing, year after year, will not help your program. Always take time at the end of the year to reflect on what worked, what didn’t, and how to make things better for next year.

Z – zzzzz (sleep). The importance of sleep cannot be understated. A growing boy or girl needs a minimum of 8 hours per night. When you throw in the demands of being an athlete, that really becomes more like 10. How many kids are actually getting that much sleep?

There it is, the ABCs of Roughrider Cross Country. If you were able to take one thing or all 26, I hope you have been able to get something out of this. Cross country is an unbelievable sport and the kids who do it are phenomenal. Laura and I have been blessed with some really great and special athletes over the years. If you want more information about any of these (or other topics), please let me know. You can reach me at nathan.stamstad@k12.nd.us. Hope you all have a good season and good luck to you and your athletes!

About the Author

Nathan graduated from the University of Mary in 2012 and has been teaching 7-12 grade math at Wilton Public School for the past ten years. He and his wife, Megan, and their two daughters, Olivia and Claire, live in Bismarck.