

High School Summer Training : Optimizing your fall cross country performance

By Greg McMillan, M.S.

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As a high school runner, I won a state title in track, but I was fourth in cross country when I probably should have won. In retrospect, I won in track because I was smart in the winter. I lost in cross country because I wasn't smart in the summer. As summer approaches, here's what I think high school runners should do to have their best cross country season (and what I wish I had done before my senior year). The tips below will also help adult runners who want to focus on shorter races like 5Ks during the fall.

01) BUILD YOUR ENDURANCE

In high school, I had sufficient speed (I could easily run under 60 seconds for 400 meters) but I lacked the endurance to run at the front long enough to use it. Instead, I ran "summer track," where I performed speed work all summer. I was fit when the season started but wasn't aerobically strong. I needed more endurance training, not 5K speed training all summer.

To build the endurance you need for fall, summer training must involve a gradual-yet-steady increase in volume of running. The ultimate goal is to be able to run two 1-hour runs and one 90-minute run each week. The other days are shorter runs to make up your weekly mileage, but the key is the two 1-hour runs and the one 90-minute run, even if you run only three days per week.

If your long run starts at 45 minutes, add 10 minutes to each week's workout until you hit 90 minutes. It may take you five to six weeks but you will soon be up to 90 minutes and can hold it there for the remainder of the summer. Do the same thing for two of your mid-week runs: Add five to 10 minutes to them each week until you reach 60 minutes, then hold it there the rest of the summer. Do not jump up in volume too fast, and be open to taking a "down" week with reduced volume every three to six weeks to aid recovery.

There is no magic mileage; some runners will find that 40 miles per week is best while others may be able to run 70 miles each week. Be patient and let your fitness build. Consistency is the key, and ramping up too fast will result in injury and stunt your aerobic development. The end goal is to stay healthy while building your aerobic engine, so find your mileage "sweet spot" and hold it there.

02) DEVELOP YOUR LEG SPEED

A mistake many high school runners make during the summer is to focus exclusively on running mileage. We've learned, however, that including a weekly speed workout in the summer base phase helps improve leg speed and eases the transition to race-specific training once cross country season begins. Once a week throughout the summer, perform a stride workout: Start with six to eight laps of the track -- striding the straightaways and jogging the curves. Build up to running eight to 10 laps by the last month of your summer training.

Note that leg speed training is not hard, anaerobic training like I did before my senior cross country season. Rather, it is neuromuscular training and does not interfere with aerobic development. In fact, it shouldn't even feel like a workout at all. It is just striding. This is also the workout to work on your technique. Run tall. Run beautiful. Run smooth. Focus on short, quick, light strides and avoid overstriding (reaching out and landing on your heel in front of your body).

03) IMPROVE YOUR TECHNIQUE

Many high school runners have sloppy running form. Race photos show arms crossing the midline of the body, legs and feet not in alignment, slouching, leaning too far forward or backward and a myriad of other form errors. A goal should be to run beautifully just like the elites do. While there is no one best running form, working on your technique two to three times per week can help develop better running posture, which can help you stay injury-free in training and stronger in the latter stages of your cross country races.

Beyond monitoring your posture and stride during daily runs and stride workouts, distance runners should perform technique drills to really make the proper form become your regular running pattern. You can work with your coach (and maybe even a video camera) to improve your technique throughout the summer.

04) BUILD YOUR BODY

To achieve the week-to-week consistency needed to fully develop the aerobic system, develop leg speed, improve technique and reduce the chance of injury, you need a functionally strong body that can withstand the rigors of training. Two to three times per week during the summer, high school runners should perform a circuit workout that trains the core, improves dynamic ability (low-level plyometrics), aids in injury resistance and improves balance and coordination.

The elite group I work with does an extensive circuit program twice per week. The athletes find these exercises to be fun yet challenging. As with each component discussed, the exercises are gradually introduced and advanced across the base phase and into the competitive phase of training.