

A Parents Guide To Cross Country

Welcome! Your son or daughter has joined the cross country team.

What is Cross Country?

Cross country is a competitive team sport offered in the fall for students in grades 9 through 12. Training and optional group runs start in the early summer and the more running an athlete does throughout the summer to get into shape and acclimate to the heat, the more he or she will be prepared to have a successful fall season of cross country. A cross country team consists of five or more runners who all race together at the same time with other teams. The varsity division may have a maximum of 7 runners, but on junior varsity, there are usually an unlimited number of runners allowed. The great thing about cross country (abbreviated XC or CC) is that everyone competes! Everyone runs the same course, and although the first 7 runners to finish are considered to be the official team at every meet, ALL athletes get to participate either on varsity or JV. There are no cuts, and no bench to sit on and watch while others play!

The top five finishers from each team have their place scored and their finishing places are added up for the team score. The lowest score wins. High school races are normally 3.1 miles long. However sometimes at the beginning of the season a race might be shorter distance-typically 2 miles, in order to get athletes used to racing. The cross country race courses are mostly run across grassy fields, wooded paths, and have a mixture of hills and flats. Usually the terrain is ever changing and the footing is not always consistent, which can make cross country running more challenging than running on a firm and stable surface like a track or road. You also never know how firm or soft the surface may be and if it has rained lately, then there might be mud or puddles to run through or navigate around. If it's raining or snowing, races usually go on, unless there is thunder and lightening or the conditions have been deemed to be too severe or unsafe for the runners. When running cross country, athletes have to be prepared for all conditions: hot, cold, rainy, snowy, windy, wet, dry, humid, or whatever else mother nature throws at the runners!

Philosophy

Our philosophy of cross country is similar to most schools:

- Everyone is important, unique, and contributes to the team
- There are no cuts and everyone who comes out will be a part of the team as long as they are present and putting in an effort every day
- Runners are expected to train hard every day and be prepared for practice with the proper clothes and shoes
- We can have fun, train hard, and race well all at the same time
- Everyone can reach for his or her personal best and will try and improve each race
- Races are meant to be competitive-they are RACES and athletes will be trying to beat their teammates and competitors from other schools
- Every athlete will be a good team member and help his or her teammates to succeed so that we can be a better team
- We want to inspire a love of running

Everyone is Important

Every athlete is vital to the success of the program. Regardless of whether you are at the front or somewhere else in the pack you play an important role on the team. Each person brings his or her own set of skills and abilities to the sport. Our goal is to assist each runner to achieve the most he or she can. Training programs set up by the coaches are specific to helping runners achieve success during cross country season and feedback from athletes is valued. The coaches work with each athlete both as an individual and as part of the team to help both maximize their potential.

We may run in different places each day. We do a lot of running on the roads around school and try and mix up which way we are going on a daily basis for the sake of variety. Some days we may stay on campus and run around the school or on the track. Also we might have days where we go and run on our home cross country course in order to be more specific in our training to be ready for our upcoming races that will be on the same surface.

We hope that we inspire a love of running in our athletes. Running is something that can be done by everyone for the rest of their life and all of the coaches have been or still are active runners. We seek to inspire people to run not just for competition, but also for good health, stress relief, and making new friends!

Team and Individual Successes

Our goal every year is do well both as a team and individually. We want each individual to run faster and faster as the season goes on. Ultimately we expect each individual to push for spots on the varsity team. This should be the goal of every runner.

The ultimate goal is to have our teams and individuals qualify for the state championship meet held in early November. To qualify we first run at our district meet where the top 4 teams and the top 30 individuals qualify to the sectional meet. Many of the individuals in the top 30 will be on those top 4 teams, but individuals not on those qualifying teams will qualify to run by themselves without their full team. Then at the sectional meet the same situation applies to qualify for the state meet: two districts meet up at a sectional meet, so there will be 8 teams plus individuals that qualified. At the state meet, qualifiers from four sectionals meet up and the 16 teams and the individuals that qualified will be running for the state championship (both team and individual champions are crowned) and to be all-state (The top 25 runners). The district-sectional-state meets are run three Saturdays in a row in late October and early November and are the most important meets of the season and what we work towards. If someone is a JV runner, then his or her most important meet of the season will be the conference championship meet that happens before the district meet in mid October.

How Cross Country is Scored

The goal in cross country meets is to have the LOWEST team score. Cross country meets are scored by each team adding up the places of its top 5 finishers and places are determined in order of scores from low to high. For example, a team that scores 27 points places ahead of a team that scores 28 points, as follows:

Team A Runners: 1st, 4th, 5th, 8th, 10th, 13th, 14th = 28 points

Team B Runners: 2nd, 3rd, 6th, 7th, 9th, 11th, 12th = 27 points

In this example Team B wins the meet. This example is a dual meet with two teams and meets with 6 or less teams are considered to be small meets. Big invitational meets can have 10, 20, 30 or more teams entered!

A team's 6th and 7th place runners can also figure in the scoring if they place ahead of the other teams' top 5 finishers. When that is the case, they become "pushers" by pushing up their opponents' scores. Therefore a team's 6th and 7th place runners are important even if they aren't scoring for the team. They also have to be ready to step up in the top 5 if a top 5 runner goes down with injury or illness or just has a bad race. Only a team's 6th and 7th finishers can be "pushers", regardless of how many of its runners may finish ahead of an opposing team's top 5 finishers.

What it Takes to Be Successful

More than anything else, success in Cross Country takes time...time to learn; time to train; time to sleep, rest and recover; after school time; weekend time racing and training away from the coaches; time away from other interests and sacrificing some social events; and willingness to commit yourself to being a good runner. With the academic responsibilities of being a high school student, most student-athletes are busy all the time. We try to achieve a balance between all things while aspiring to do well in cross country. The willingness to devote the time that success demands in the classroom and the sport of cross country takes DEDICATION. You can't be a good cross country without being dedicated and the willingness to push yourself beyond your comfort zone on a regular basis. Many good cross country runners are also strong students in the classroom and other interests or jobs they pursue in life because they have learned to be dedicated and to push themselves through hard times. They have a desire to succeed and not just settle for okay.

Being a member of the cross country team carries other expectations and responsibilities. Doing what is expected of every team member takes COMMITMENT. Attending team practices every day is one of the commitments expected. At the start of each season, each athlete will be made aware of rules and policies, and the athletic code of conduct and academic eligibility requirements. Our goal is to develop team loyalty and individual responsibility and accountability among all our team members. High school sports are wonderful vehicles for personal growth. We hope that you as parents will appreciate this and support our goals and the goals of your runner.

Another commitment we expect is COMMUNICATION with our coaching staff. If a problem or illness is going to force your son or daughter to miss practice or a meet, we expect him or her to tell us about it personally in advance. (This does not mean relaying a message through a teammate or friend.) Many such problems can be solved when athletes communicate with us.

It's important that we know ahead of time (more than a week ideally) when an athlete is going to have to miss a meet because we do our meet entries the week before a meet and we can adjust accordingly.

How Can You Help Your Son or Daughter Before the Season Starts?

We strongly encourage our runners to follow a training regimen during the summer. Individualized programs or specific training might be provided for experienced runners while younger or new runners are given more basic goal of training over the summer to get in miles of running to prepare them for cross country season. Pre-season summer training is essential to build a fitness base for intensive workouts and races during the season. As your aspiring young runner begins the first week of training, you may wonder what to expect and how you can assist him or her as a parent in terms of recovery, eating, sleeping, and mental attitude.

A normal consequence of beginning to train is muscle soreness, which will soon go away. If your son or daughter has not competed in sports before, this may persist up to 2 weeks. They should communicate this to us so we can adjust their training if needed. Usually it just takes time to start feeling better. Any athlete engaged in intensive training and competition can be subject to injury. We can prevent some injuries when our runners tell us about their aches and pains before they become disabling, so we can have them treated. A nutritious, well balanced diet is essential for an athlete. Fatty, fried foods, and carbonated drinks like soda should be avoided during the season. On race day, small portions of easily digested food, including some protein, that's eaten at least 2 hours before competition is best. However, each athlete needs to learn what works best for them in regard to eating before meets and workouts. Drinking water or hydrating is essential. Runners need to try and be drinking at LEAST 8 eight-ounce glasses of water during each 24-hour period. Their drinking should be over the full day and evening, rather than chugging a bunch of water to try and catch up on their fluid intake. Water is preferential to sports drinks, as many sports drinks are full of sugar.

How to Buy Running Shoes

Cross country athletes will need two pairs of shoes to run in. First they will need a pair of training shoes to run in on a daily basis at practice and also will be used before and after races when warming up and cooling down. During the race, runners will be wearing spikes, which provide better grip and are lighter weight that allows them to run faster. Athletes should always buy their shoes at local running stores where there are knowledgeable sales people who are experienced runners and are trained to fit runners with the proper shoes for their feet and how they move. Running shoes should ONLY be worn when running and not for casual wear. The more you wear them, the more they will wear out. Do NOT go to a discount shoe store and think you're buying quality running shoes. The shoes you will find may look like running shoes, but they will not offer the proper cushioning and stability that runners need. You will be getting what you pay for and your runner will more than likely end up with some kind of foot, lower leg, or knee problem. Wearing worn out or cheap shoes is the most likely cause of injuries for runners. Generally speaking most runners will get anywhere from 250-500 miles out of their shoes before they need to be replaced. If a runner competes in both cross country and track, they will need a new pair of training shoes for each season-one in the fall and one in the spring. Spikes will usually last a year or two as they are not worn as much. Often times a pair of training shoes will cost between \$90 and \$180. Spikes will cost between \$60-\$120. It's important that shoes be selected for their function, quality, and feel, and NOT their pretty or cool colors!

It's not necessary to purchase special running apparel and athletes can run in t-shirts and shorts for daily training. However they are going to be much more comfortable in technical running gear that is lighter weight and wicks moisture from the skin. Cotton clothing holds the water from sweat or rain and will get heavier and chafe against the skin. It's also recommended, but not necessary to invest in quality cold weather running gear such as a pair of running tights, a winter weather running top, running gloves, and a running hat so that your runner can be comfortable running in the colder weather of late fall, winter, and early spring. All athletes will be issued a team uniform and warm-ups to be worn only for races.

Cross Country Vocabulary

- **5K**...3.1 miles-the normal race distance for cross country meets
- **CHIP (CHIP TIMING)**...in invitational meets runners wear a chip tied onto their shoe laces or embedded in their race number that senses and records the finishing time of a runner
- **COOL-DOWN**...easy running after a race or hard workout that allows the muscles to get rid of lactic acid that builds up and to allow the body to settle down and lower its temperature to normal and be better prepared for the next day's run
- **COURSE**...the marked and measured route of the race
- **DUAL MEET**...cross country meet between two teams
- **DYNAMIC WARM-UP**...a warm-up routine that involves movements with jogging and plyometric drills and can last from 10-30 minutes
- **FALSE START**...leaving the starting line before the gun sounds
- **FINISH CHUTE**...a flagged off area that starts by the finish line and funnels past the finish line that moves runners into a single file order of finish.
- **FORM**...refers to a the way a runners body moves, trying to maintain good posture and arm and leg action
- **INVITATIONAL MEET**...a multi-team meet of more than 4 schools
- **KICK**...a burst of speed at the finish of the race to beat out other runners
- **NEGATIVE SPLIT**...running the second half of a race or later miles during the race at a faster pace than earlier in the race
- **PACE**...running speed over a particular distance (Ex: pace per mile-what a runner averaged over each mile of a race)
- **PACK**...a group of runners that are teammates that work together in close proximity to one another during the race to try and beat other teams
- **PERSONAL RECORD (PR)**...best ever performance for a particular distance.
- **PLYOMETRIC DRILLS (DRILL WORK OR PLYOS)**...drills that are a part of warm-ups in practice and before races that involve bounding to develop strength and coordination and teach muscles to fire properly and improve running form
- **QUAD MEET**...cross country meet with 4 teams
- **RACING SPIKES**...lightweight racing shoes with screw-in spikes on the bottom for better grip on soft surfaces that allows runners to race faster
- **SPLITS**... times for each mile, kilometer, or other pre-planned distances during a race
- **STATE**...The state championship meet
- **STARTING BOX**...designated area to which a team is assigned on the starting line
- **SURGE**...a tactical increase in pace during the race to shake opponents and open a gap
- **TOP 7**...the scoring members of a Cross Country Team
- **TRAINING (RUNNING) SHOES**...running shoes designed for daily training and warming up or cooling down in
- **TRI-MEET**...cross country meet with three teams

- **WARM-UP**...easy running and plyometric drills that gradually warms up the body for intense running and racing.
- **WORKOUT**...a daily training session

Preparing to Watch Your First Cross Country Meet

When you arrive at the meet understand that while it's okay to say hello to your runner or give them items they may need, please keep your meeting with them brief. We love having family and friends at races to cheer the runners on, but realize that the runners need to be focused on the race. They have their warm-up, meeting with coaches, racing, and cool-down after the race to be doing and won't have time to hang out with family and friends. On our website (<http://northwesttrack.org>) there are course maps of each course we compete on that you can print out and bring with you to know where the race course goes. When you go to the website, go to the cross country section and then go to the course page and click on the course name. The maps are labeled with the start and finish lines and mile and kilometer marks.

During the race, you can move from point to point along the course to cheer the runners as they pass. Be careful, however, to stay off the course and out of the way of the runners' path. Rules also forbid running alongside a competitor to pace or encourage him or her. If you do this, your runner will be disqualified from the race. You will want to locate the start and finish line of the race and then try to scout out points along the course where you can see as much of the race with as little moving around as possible. Be aware that the start and finish of the race are not always in the same area.

Many parents may be initially surprised at the seriousness their son or daughter shows prior to and during a race. The intensity of competition may reveal a side of your young athlete's personality you haven't seen before. At the finish of the race, the runners will file through the finish chute. It's OK to greet them and congratulate them, but they may have to turn a place card into the coach ASAP so scores can be tabulated. Our runners have other responsibilities after the race. We expect them to start their cool-down run with their teammates within 10 minutes after the race finishes and then to actively support other teammates who have yet to race.

Also be prepared that after a race, runners may need some time to recover and may look completely spent or have trouble even standing. Give them some space. Some runners are more spent than others after a race. Typical symptoms of their effort and fatigue are being out of breath, general weakness, rubbery legs, glassy eyes, salivating, and sometimes nausea. A mistake parents sometimes make is to take their son or daughter off by themselves to try and take care of them. Please do not do this! Coaches are experienced in dealing with these symptoms, trained in first-aid, and responsible for their care. If need be, there is usually a trainer on site to care for injuries and illness. To aid recovery, water is the best thing to drink immediately after a race.

Expect the possibility of some disappointment by your athlete after the race if his or her team did not do well, and/or if he or she failed to achieve their goals or run well. Athletes may need some emotional space afterward from both you and their coaches. Later on, they will need verbal support rather than criticism. As coaches, we will talk with them later about the specifics of their race and how they can do better in the future.

Once an away meet is over, if your son or daughter came on our bus, please do not take him or her home with you without checking in with the coaching staff first. Also know that high school

athletes are not allowed to drive themselves to a meet without the permission of a coach and a written note from a parent. After the meet, we can release them only to you to drive home. If you want them to ride home with another adult or family member, you need to send a note with your athlete to give to the coaches with permission. Athletes will NEVER be allowed to ride home with another teenager. We also cannot have you give permission over the phone.

Runners cannot typically leave right away after their race is over, unless they have an important pressing commitment (other school function, ACT or SAT, IMPORTANT family function to attend, etc.) If this is going to be the case please let the coaches know of this ahead of time. Again, runners have important post-race duties to attend to and we want everyone to stay and support their teammates in later races and during any awards ceremonies. Please don't force your athlete to leave early because you don't want to wait for them to do what they are expected to do as a team member. It puts the athlete in an awkward position.

Parent Involvement

Remember that children imitate the actions of adults. Please act properly and in a manner that won't embarrass your child or the team and follow the rules of the facility we are at. Also be supportive in a positive way and don't demean your runner if they aren't doing well that day.

We have a number of areas where we need parents to give their time and energy to help out the program such as helping with home meets, fundraisers, providing drinks at the finish line, and picking up athletes on time after practices and races. We want our athletes, parents and coaches working together all year long. The program is a lot of fun to be around and please make the time to be with our team and make yourself known to the athletes, coaches and other parents. Cross country is a great sport and if you get involved, you might just find yourself hooked on the sport and become a big fan! Who knows you might even take up running yourself or get back into the sport you did when you were younger.

For information about the team, the schedule, results, statistics, courses, or the sport of cross country check out our website on a regular basis at <http://northwesttrack.org>.