TIPS FOR CROSS-COUNTRY AND TRACK ATHLETES
AND THEIR PARENTS

The goal of this handout is for parent and athletes to have a better understanding of the physical and mental demands that are placed on a runner’s body. The information included should be used as a guide only. Each individual may need to do their own thing or eat a special food before a race and I would encourage them to do so. If you have any questions or would like to contribute information for me please e-mail me at jderocco@niskyschools.org. Thanks and I hope you find the information helpful.

Pre-Meet Two-Days Out

Pre-meet in my mind starts two days before the actual event. That is the time when sleep is critical. It does seem strange, but your body needs the rest on a Thursday more so than a Friday for a Saturday meet. Try to get homework taken care early so that you can maximize your rest time. If you work, try to schedule around this day so that you are not up on your feet the whole time.

Two days prior to a meet is also a good time to consider food options. You will want to cut back on your fats and proteins a bit here and start focusing more on your energy foods (carbohydrates). You will need protein to rebuild muscle that was broken down from a workout, but you will need carbs to fuel your energy stores. Fluid intake is also going to be very important. Try to make certain that you are drinking plenty of water, juice, or sports drinks later in the week. Stay away from soda. The carbonation will only harm your performance.

The main focus is to rest though. You all have busy schedules and your body will need to recover. This is especially true since most hard workouts do occur two days before a major race.

Pre-Meet One-Day Out

All the work you’ve done during the week (or lack thereof) can’t be undone with one day prior to a meet. So, don’t think by doing a super training day on a Friday before an invitational will make you faster. That is why we usually only do a light run with some pick-ups on Friday. You will want to maintain excellent fluid intake ALL-DAY when you are a day away from competition. I recommend absolutely no soda. I tend to shy away even from milk and orange juice the day before a race, because my stomach won’t handle it well. Use your best judgment. Try to experiment with different drinks the day before so that you learn what your body can handle.

Food-wise you really need to focus on the carbs. Pastas, breads, rice, and other starches are very helpful. I know if I try to eat a steak the day before a race, my body will not process it in time, and I will be digesting it well after the race is over! So, eat things that you know will be digested easily, and eat appropriate portions. Do not gorge yourself with food with the thinking the more I eat the stronger I’ll be. Again, if your body is using energy trying to digest food, it can’t put that energy into helping your performance.

The day before, if you know the course put on some music that you like, and do some mental imagery of the race. Formulate a plan. “I want to make a move here”, “I have to remember that hill comes up at mile 2”, “I remember last time the footing was really good here so I can fly!” Run the race in your head. Picture everything, the trees, the grass, and the road. Hear the sounds of your footfalls, the birds singing, and your teammates cheering for you. Get yourself in the proper frame of mind for what you want to do. Always set a goal prior to the race. If you don’t, you will have no internal motivation that will stir you along. Make sure the goal is a realistic one. Talk to your coaches about it ahead of time. We want you to succeed, let us help you get there.
If you normally go out with your friends, do so. Just don’t stay out too late running around. Sleep is still important, but your meal is vital. Have your meet bag packed that night. It’s one less thing you have to worry about in the morning. Have your uniform set, extra clothes and shoes. Pack extra spikes if you will be racing in them.

**Meet Day! The morning**

When race day is here, make sure that you eat something for breakfast. You can’t perform without fuel. Give your body a chance to do what it can. Set your alarm early enough so that you are not rushing around in the morning. You may be nervous already, why compound it by almost missing the bus and not eating? Again, know your body. I like to have oatmeal on race morning. My body won’t do eggs or pancakes, they just kind of sit in my gut all day and I feel slow. Drink some water or sports drink in the morning and bring some with you to the race. Do whatever you need to do in the morning to feel comfortable. If you need to shower (even though you will sweat in a few hours) do it. Teach your body the routine, so that when the gun goes off, it will not be a shock to your system.

**Meet Day! Arrival at the course**

When the bus arrives at the meet, take the bathroom time when you can get it. When more and more teams show up, that time will be limited. Find a spot for you and the team to camp out. Get the course map and head out together on a walk as soon as possible. It is important to stay together as a team. The older runners can teach the youngsters facets of the course from experience. If the coach goes with you, listen to what they have to say about tangents, landmarks, and places to make moves. Never walk into any competition without some sort of plan laid out ahead of time. The plan is subject to change when situations arise but, it is much better to adapt a pre-made plan, than to formulate a new one on the fly. When you finish, don’t cross the finish line. Go around the chute. Why? I don’t know. I’m just very superstitious! When you finish walking the course, rest and drink some fluids. Discuss any thoughts with your teammates and/or coach. Do not take a nap. XC meets go by much faster than track meets. If you nap so close after waking in the morning, your body will shut down and you will become lethargic. That’s the last thing you need before running 1.5 to 3.1 miles! Have a bite to eat as well. You should safely be able to eat light things such as a bagel or granola bar up to 90 minutes before the start. Again, know your body. Some of you may be able to eat 10 minutes before a race, others of you may need 4 hours. Be smart!

**Meet Day! Warm-Up time**

Meet days are just practices with uniforms. The routine that you follow during the week should be implemented before your races, just with a bit more intensity. You and your teammates should do for a 10-15 minute jog of varying intensity about 35 minutes before the start. This will get your heart pumping and warm you up. Go to the restroom now if you need to. Do not wait until the bitter end in case there is a line or some other unforeseen stealer of time. Then a good set of static stretches will limber you up, and allow your body to achieve full range of motion. At about 15 minutes before the start take your flats/spikes down to the starting area. Change into them. Hit some leg drills and other dynamic stretches to stay warm and keep your heart rate somewhat elevated. Only at this point should your warm-up pants come off. You should keep a shirt on to keep your core warm. At about 5 minutes prior to the gun, a set of 2-4 TEAM strides should be done. Then you may take off your T-shirt and be in full race garb, and hopefully frame of mind. Wish your teammates good luck, and get focused. Run the race to the best of your ability, and enjoy yourself out there!

**Meet Day! Postrace**

Once you complete your journey don’t fall down, lay down, or sit down. Get a shirt on, and get a drink. Change back into your training shoes. Do some static stretching until all your teammates are done. It is vital that you warm-down IMMEDIATELY. You want your heart rate to come back down slowly. If you wait too long, all you will end up doing is warming-UP again.
This should be done AS A TEAM! Congratulate or console each other on the recent events. Think about what transpired. What went well? What went wrong? The warm-down should be 20-30 minutes of easy relaxed running with GOOD FORM. Just because the race is over, don’t get lazy. Teach your body the importance of good running mechanics at all times.

When you return, get a drink and eat something. It is important to get some fuel to your body within 45-60 minutes of finishing a hard effort. This does not mean candy! (Coach Rocky’s lollipops are OK though!) Eat a bagel, muffin, granola bar, fruit, etc. This will start the recovery process immediately. Do a good set of stretches. Be prepared to discuss the race with your coach….the good and the bad. Each practice and each race should be a learning experience. If you want to excel in this sport you have to understand the race as a whole, learn from your mistakes, and remember your successes.

**Meet Day! Dinner that night**

Once you make it home give your body time to relax before you head out to see your friends. Make sure that you eat dinner! Now, the proteins are much more important than the carbohydrates. The proteins will help you recover and will aid in rebuilding muscle tissue to make you stronger. Meats, chicken, fish, and vegetables served with potatoes (for a bit of carbs) should be on the menu. After the meet is over, still try to stay away from soda as it is still a diuretic. You need to maintain your liquid intake with water, juice, or sports drinks.

Start keeping a meet journal to track your progress. It is helpful to keep a running log day by day, but at least meet by meet. This should summarize not only your time and place, but also what the course was like and how you felt along the way. This will help you to locate trends on what things make you feel good, and what things you need to avoid.

**Meet Day + 1**

The day after your performance you must maintain your fluid intake. Keep eating those proteins and even introduce a few fats. Enjoy eating a treat or two as you’ve earned that right. It is important though to get out there and run long early in the season. It will make your tapering days that much more worthwhile. Sunday’s after meets should include 70-120 minute runs with push-ups and sit-ups. This will continue until about ¾ of the season is over. Then you can start cutting back to 45-60 minutes. These will aid in removing lactic acid, and also keep you sharp. Once you get into a routine, stay into it. If you get out of it, it will take a long time to get re-motivated.

**Summary**

Try to remember the following:

- sleep is important 2 nights before competition
- carbohydrates before races, proteins after
- water, juice, and sports drinks (50-50 to 70-30 dilution) will help you stay hydrated
- soda is a diuretic and can have adverse effects on your performance
- eat things that will agree with your system
- make sure to eat breakfast on meet day
- bananas, apples, bagels, granola snacks are good pre-meet foods
- eat something after you warm-down to get the recovery process going as soon as possible!
- warm-up and warm-down as a team
- if you have a routine that you use, keep doing it!
- set realistic goals and talk about them with your teammates or coach
- discuss positives and negatives of each race with a coach
- running is a lifelong sport, have fun and enjoy yourself out there!
- don’t be afraid to fail. You will never learn how far your body will let you go, unless you give it a chance
If you ever have any questions about anything, please ask us. No matter what the topic, and no matter if we have an immediate answer for you, we will try to find out for you. Runner’s World is a magazine with a great amount of information. There are plenty of books out there as well that will help you. Be healthy, and be fast!

Other Considerations

**Diet and Rest**

To perform at high levels, an athlete needs to get a full amount of rest and eat well. Sleep is very important in general, but especially 2 days prior to competition. So, with a meet on Saturday, Thursday’s rest cycle is vital. The lack of sleep will catch up with the body after 2 days.

Eating healthy is important for success. Carbohydrates are the key to high energy production. Proteins will help the body recover and build muscle after hard efforts. Fats are also important as a backup source to burn for energy. An athlete's diet should consist of about 60% carbohydrates, 30% proteins, and 10% fats. Carbohydrate consumption should consist of complex carbs versus simple carbs. Examples of complex carbs are multi-grain breads and potatoes, whereas simple carbs include white bread and sugary snacks. A multivitamin is a nice supplement to the daily diet.

Maintaining a high level of hydration is a must for cross country athletes. Water, juices, and sports drinks are great options. Soda and other carbonated beverages are not good choices, because they tend to dehydrate the body. If you wait until you are thirsty to start drinking, it is already too late.

**CLOTHING**

Though cross country is a fall sport, we start in the summer and end almost in the winter. You can expect to experience large swings in temperature and precipitation. You must be prepared for any type of weather including rain, snow, wind, extremely warm, and extremely cold temperatures. The following provides a checklist of items that you should consider bringing to each practice and meet. Make copies of it so that you have it available for each practice or meet day:
- Food, water, sports drinks
- Uniform
- Training shoes
- Racing flats / spikes
- Spike wrench and spikes
- Extra socks
- Extra shorts
- Wind pants
- Sweat pants
- Short sleeve T-shirt
- Long sleeve t-shirt
- Windbreaker
- Sweatshirt
- Hat and gloves
- Money for concession stands
- Plastic bags in case of rain/snow
**SHOES and SPIKES**

To be successful in cross country, athletes need to have the proper footwear. Tennis, basketball, and cross training shoes are not good choices. A running shoe minimum is necessary for the health and safety of the athlete. There are many brands and styles that work well. *Fleet Feet Sports* in Colonie and *Road Runner Sports* on the web are excellent places to shop. Your coaches get several catalogs throughout the season so just ask if you are looking for some ideas. It is important that you don’t use your training shoes in excess of 500-600 miles. Traditionally in high school running this means that you can get at most 2 consecutive seasons out of your shoes before you change them. For example, if you bought new shoes at the start of summer and actually did the summer training that was laid out for you, you would be ready for a new pair of trainers by the middle or end of cross country season.

Some athletes choose to run in a lightweight racing flat or spike. This is entirely up to you and depends on your level of commitment and how many seasons you will compete. If you are just running XC to get in shape for another sport, I would not recommend a change to racing shoes. If you are serious about running and plan to do one or both of the track seasons, then it is a great idea to get racing shoes. They fit much differently than trainers and do not provide as much support, but they are lightweight and could make you feel faster. Let us know if you have any questions about these types of shoes.

**SCORING**

Scoring in XC is similar to golf in that the lowest score wins. There are 7 members to a cross country team. The team’s score is the sum of the places of the first 5 runners. Scorers 6 and 7 are known as displacers. They do not contribute to the sum of points, but can help to add points to the competitor’s teams. Ties are broken by the lower placing 6th runner from each team. We are a member of the North Division of the Suburban Council. Burnt Hills-Ballston Lake, Ballston Spa, Saratoga, Shenendehowa, and Shaker are the other schools in this division.

**ASSISTANCE**

As you review the schedule, you will notice we have 3 home meets this season. Cross country involves much more behind the scenes than you may realize. We typically set up the start and finish line areas the day before the meet. We put out markers for each mile and kilometer on the course. We need to make and hand out place cards at the finish line as the runners cross. We need to time each individual over 4-6 races each meet. Some races will have well over 100 athletes completing the course. We then need to input the competitors and their times into the computer program and print results for all schools in attendance. If you can help us at any of the 3 meets, please let one of us know. Your help will be greatly appreciated! We are looking forward to a great season!