

## Clark Rivers on Coaching Distance Runners

As a coach, especially a new coach, it's important that you reflect upon your personal situation and find what works best for you, your personality, your school community, and the runners on your team. You won't be perfect, so anticipate this and be open to change. As you read through resources, you will find many successful coaches with many different approaches and that is because there are many different approaches that will yield success. Early in my career I tried to copy and paste training programs from more successful coaches, and it didn't work out all that well, and that's because I wasn't thinking about my own situation. There are a few key revelations I had through the years that I believe had a significant impact on how I approach training, how I connect to my runners, how I build my runners up physically and mentally, how I correct my runners, etc.

Here are a number of the most important lessons I have learned over my ~20 coaching:

Lesson #1 – learned from Coach Bill Thorn at Landmark Christian School

**Everyday serves a purpose.** There are 365 days in a year and every day has a purpose. Sometimes that purpose is to run fast and break your body down. Sometimes the purpose is to run slow and recover. Sometimes the purpose is to take a day completely off. Everyday is planned and has a purpose. Consistent training, regardless of the quality of the training, is the #1 way to improve. As a coach, if you can get 10+ kids on a team training consistently year-round, you will have a solid team.

Lesson #2 – learned from Coach Roby Ross at Landmark Christian School

**Tell people you care about them and show them that you care about them.** As humans we want to be a part of a group. You oversee a group. If the members of that group feel like they are valued and they belong, they will give more effort, they will have more fun, and they will be faster. You will have more fun too! What are some things I do to show others I care about them? When I arrive at practice I say hello to everyone, I call them by their name and I smile at them. I give specific and individualized compliments at least once a week, especially after races or big workouts. During practice, I try to guide each runner like they are the top runner and I try to say their name multiple times a day. On workout days I record everyone's times in a training log. When I leave practice, I say goodbye to everyone individually by name and give a fist bump, high five, handshake, etc. When someone is talking I try to give them my full attention. Always be honest, but if you can say something to empower them and let them know you believe in them, most people appreciate that. Sometimes I miss the mark on what I detailed above, but what you read is my goal every day.

Lesson #3 – learned from John Wooden books

**My expectations should focus on the runners' efforts rather than their results. I should expect the runners to make mistakes and guide them accordingly.** If the efforts are in the

right place, the results will follow eventually. Are the athletes sleeping well? Are they eating enough and eating well? Are they trying to run the appropriate paces? Are they tackling the supplemental work to the best of their ability? What should their efforts be at various points in a workout or race? I always assume the runners are giving their best efforts unless I have obvious evidence of the contrary. I believe extending this respect to the runners is appreciated and gets them to be more bought-in to our process and respect me more.

Lesson #4 – learned from Coach Bill Thorn

**Lean into being tough.** Running is extremely difficult physically and mentally. The tougher your runners can be, the more consistent they will be, and ultimately the faster they will be. Some of my favorite days are when it is mid 40's and rainy – it's miserable! Lacrosse is cancelled, soccer is cancelled, baseball is cancelled, the sprinters cancel. There is a good chance most of our competitors across the state have cancelled too. We are alone on the track. We leave practice that day knowing we are the toughest group on campus and we carry that feeling with us everyday. That said, don't run during thunderstorms – stay safe!

Lesson #5 – learned from Arthur Lydiard books and articles

**Be flexible with your training.** This includes before the run begins and after the run starts. Just because you wrote something down on a piece of paper, doesn't mean you should see it through to the end. Sometimes an athlete runs too fast early in a workout and they should be stopped early rather than run the workout in an unintended way. Sometimes a runner looks great and adding a rep or having them run a faster rep is appropriate. Sometimes an easy run should be a mile shorter or a mile longer based on how the athlete is recovering from their previous run. Know how you want the athletes to feel at a given time, seek feedback from your runners, and use that information to adjust the training as needed.

Lesson #6 – learned from trial and error

**Workout types can be mixed.** You want to run a tempo run today? Great, mix in some shorter/faster reps at mile pace or faster after the tempo run is over. You want to run some very fast/short reps? Great, run a couple miles at threshold effort following the fast reps. Our biological processes and muscle groups aren't siloed, they work together concurrently. Therefore, all paces need to be addressed every few weeks, including changing paces during the same workout. I like to have a primary focus that I have the athletes run first and follow it up with a secondary focus. This also helps the runners not give too much effort early in a workout.

Lesson #7 – learned as a struggling collegiate runner

**Aim for good days and let the great days come to you.** Not every workout has to be the best workout ever. As a runner at Georgia Tech, I found myself on the borderline of the travel squad. When I ran great in practice I could travel and race. This led me to racing every workout in hopes of impressing my coaches. Luckily, as high school coaches our athletes don't usually find themselves in this position. I encourage my athletes to aim for good days and let the great days come to them. I have found that when a runner attempts to force a great day, the failure rate of the workout goes up exponentially (more bad days), the fitness gains are less over the course of a season, and the runners lose confidence.

Clark Rivers' Bio

### **High School**

Landmark Christian School (Coach Bill Thorn and Coach Roby Ross) – Class of 2002

Cross country team state champions – 1998, 2001

Track team state champions – 1999, 2000, 2001, 2002

HS PR's

800m – 2:00

1600m – 4:30 \*individual state champion 2001 and 2002

3200 – 9:43 \*individual state champion 2001

### **College**

Georgia Tech (Coach Alan Drosky and Coach Becky Megesi) – Class of 2006

College PR's – very slow for NCAA Power 5

Three-year varsity letter winner in XC

### **Coaching**

Sandy Creek High School (Summer 2003 and Summer 2004)

Oversaw and wrote workouts for cross country summer training

The Galloway School (Spring 2006 – Fall 2009)

Started as an assistant track and xc coach, ended as head track and xc coach.

Coached numerous school record holders

Boys cross country team placed 4<sup>th</sup> in Class A – highest in school history

Stephenson High School (Spring 2012)

Coached distance runners on the track team

Lakeside High School (Fall 2012 – Spring 2017)

Oversaw and wrote workouts for varsity cross county 2013 – 2015

Oversaw and wrote workouts for all distance runners in track season 2013, 2015-2017

Head track coach 2017

Notable runners coached

Davis Stockwell (c/o 2016) – 4:15 (1600m) and 9:17 (3200m) \*2015 6A XC state champion

Andrew Kent (c/o 2016) – 4:13 (1600m), 9:01 (3200m) \*2016 7A track state champion in 1600m and 3200m. 9:01 was #9 All-time in Georgia. Georgia Tech school record holder indoor 3k (7:56) and outdoor 5k (13:47). Personal best 5000m of 13:28.

Alaina “Corrie” Smith (c/o 2017) – 5:04 (1600m) and 11:00 (3200m)

Morgan Mihalis (c/o 2017) – 5:06 (1600m) and 11:00 (3200m)

Marist School (Fall 2017 – present)

Oversaw and wrote workouts for varsity/JV distance runners in track, 2018 – present

Head track coach, 2018-2019

Notable runners coached and relay performances

Girls 4x1600m relay (2018) – 20:55 #6 all-time in Georgia

Leif Andersen (c/o 2019) – 4:15 (1600m)

Emily Little (c/o 2020) – 5:06 (1600m) and 10:54 (3200m)

Jaylen Mallet (c/o 2021) – 1:54 (800m) and 4:24 (1600m)

Colin O’Rielly (c/o 2021) – 1:55 (800m), 4:14 (1600m), 9:09 (3200m)

Johna Grisik (c/o 2022) – 2:11 (800m) and 4:59 (1600m)

Girls 4x1600m relay (2021) – 21:02 #9 all-time in Georgia

Girls 4x800m relay (2022) – 9:15.21 #2 all-time in Georgia