

Chapter Thirteen

Putting Together a Team Strategy for Competitive Events

*Prepared from the suggestions of various
USCAA team captains, who have
schemed
up or stumbled on ways of getting the
most out of the talent that their team has.*

If your experience is like that of most of us who have tried to field a really competitive team, you are prob-

ably faced with a few gaps in the lineup. It could be that you are missing a submaster woman who can run a strong 400 meters, or maybe one of your key runners just injured himself, or you lost some multisport enthusiasts to the big softball tournament that happens the same day as the track meet. Whatever the cause, the dilemma is the same—how to put together a competitive lineup with limited resources. Here are some tips and suggestions that may help (or at least let you feel that you did all you could under the circumstances):

Before the Meet

- Make sure your runners know the date of the meet and get it onto their calendars.
- Talk with all of your runners about what they would like to run—how far and how many events. People are more likely to commit to preparing for the events they really want to run. (And if they tell you, “whatever will help the team,” you then have free license to improvise.)
- Use time trials or tune-up meets to get a good estimate of your runners’ capabilities.
- Let your runners know well in advance the events in which they will be participating, so that they can prepare physically and mentally.

Planning the Line-up

- Some meets, including the USCAA National Championships, calculate team scores by first dropping

a designated number of a team’s lowest scoring events before determining the team’s total score. This allows you to make some important choices:

- First, determine whether you have enough runners to compete in all events. If not, then you will want to enter events for which you can field the strongest team and still cover enough events to participate in the net number that will be scored. (In most corporate events, because points are awarded for participation, a slow performance is preferable to a “scratch” if the event will count toward your total points.)
- Assess those events in which you have the best chance of doing well and those that are your weakest. Put your strongest runners where they will count the most.
- If you have runners who are not likely to be competitive but deserve an opportunity to participate in a track event, consider whether you can use them in events where you might otherwise not enter a team. Remember also that the road race events allow unlimited entries, so everyone can participate.
- Sometimes the time schedule of events will dictate which events to emphasize. Because some of your runners will probably be participating in two or three events, you will want to put them in events that allow an adequate between-events rest.
- When you are planning, it is useful to do some “what if” scenarios regarding injuries. When adult bodies try to do what they remember their teenage

bodies once doing, especially in sprint-oriented events, sometimes muscles get pulled. Runners cannot easily be substituted in some events such as the Executive Relay and the President's Relay, so don't jeopardize those events by risking an earlier injury.

- If the meet has preliminaries and finals, you face a balancing act between running fast enough in the preliminaries to qualify for the finals without tiring out your best runners so that they won't be able to run their fastest in the finals. The best strategy is to run the preliminaries just fast enough to qualify with a comfortable margin. Use alternates in the prelims if you have that luxury, and put your multievent runners on the final legs if possible so that they have the option of coasting in if the lead is sufficient.
- If you will have runners from different locations running on the same relay, it is probably best to arrange your baton-passing protocols well in advance. It is often impossible to practice baton passes on the track at the meet itself.
- Some events allow you to tinker with the order of the runners. (For example, whom do you run first: your women 200-meter runners or your men 200-meter runners?) The conventional practice is to run the slower runners before the faster runners so that you are more likely to catch others than to be caught by them. However, there can be good reason at times to vary that practice—for example, to make a critical baton exchange far enough ahead of the field to avoid the possibility of distractions, other runners cutting in front of you, or even a collision.

Adjusting Your Strategy at the Meet

At the meet itself you will need to size up the quality of the competition, adjust for any last-minute injuries or drop-outs, and chart your team's standing as the meet progresses.

- Record the individual time splits for each runner on your team. The runners will want to know how they did, and you will be better able to assess any adjustments you might need to make in the lineup.
- Make sure that runners know when their events are scheduled, where they can warm up, where they need to check in, in what order they run, and how to do their baton exchanges. Sometimes the simplest miscommunication can create a major mistake.
- If you can learn how many teams are entered in specific events, you may discover that a given event is not being competed as strongly as others. You may consider adjusting to be stronger in that event.
- In some events runners get spread out, and your runners may not be able to size up where they are in the field during the race without some calibration from teammates on the sidelines. Posting members of the team at strategic points to call out where they are in the field of competitors can be very helpful.

After the Meet

- Always take time after the meet to sort through what worked and what did not. There is always something to be learned. Get the impressions of everybody who participated.
- Use the video, if you made one, to help review what happened.
- Take time to analyze the meet results when you get them to identify where, with some improvement, you could move up in the standings.
- Finally, celebrate as a team what you accomplished. That is half the fun, and it continues the building process for your next big adventure.

