

New Hampshire Track & Field Coaches Association
Clinic, November 21, 2015
Closing Comments

Gracious, self-deprecating remarks by certain coaches at today's NH Track & Field Coaches Association Clinic (to the effect that their athletes succeeded largely because the coach hadn't "ruined" them) may have had their origin more than sixty years ago when University of California Track Coach Brutus Hamilton, a revered scholar and gentleman, observed – this is a paraphrase; I can't locate the exact quote – that when an athlete or a team of athletes wins an end-of-season championship, it is self-evident that the athlete or team had the potential to win that championship way back in August before school even started.

That the athlete or team actually did win the championship says this and only this about the coach: that he or she did not interfere with the athletes' natural development.

Imagine. That may be the best we can say. The only thing we can say about our shared records of championships: that we succeed as coaches only when we manage to inflict upon our athletes the least amount of harm.

Humbling, isn't it?

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Arthur Lydiard, the great New Zealand distance running coach, said something else worth considering. Mr. Lydiard suggested that there is a potential Olympic champion in every city and town in the world waiting nothing more than discovery, inspiration and opportunity.

Scaling down Mr. Lydiard's speculation, we might challenge ourselves with the notion that within every high school in New Hampshire there are potential state champions similarly awaiting discovery, inspiration and opportunity.

Indeed, some of our member coaches seem to produce champions every year. Do they know something we don't? Should the rest of us strive to be more aggressive at stalking the skinny freshmen, the introverts (your natural distance runners), the high achievers, the students more naturally drawn to individual challenges like music, swimming, figure skating and gymnastics?

In the end, might a successful coaching record be more elusive than identifying motivated young people, encouraging them to participate in our sport, and then getting out of their way?

A question to keep us awake at nights as we ponder our profession (not to mention our personal self-worth).

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In the mid-1980's, I identified my “coaching philosophy” as a means of introducing myself to our Oyster River High School Cross Country Team and parents. It was a good exercise and I recommend it to you. What is your coaching philosophy?

In offering my philosophy as a handout today (on line at the NH Track & Field Coaches Association website), I became aware that my philosophy was little more than a laundry list of my perceived responsibilities to our athletes and teams. But it occurred to me that there was a larger question of personal values and priorities that needed asking, a question that extended beyond a list of mere responsibilities: namely the question of why.

Why did I coach? Why did it mean so much to me? What was my purpose in coaching?

Was I coaching endurance running, or was I coaching people?

Was I elevating lactate threshold and increasing mitochondria, or was I teaching values like self-discipline, responsibility, commitment and the habit of aerobic exercise? And if both, which did I consider more important?

Over time, I have answered those questions to my satisfaction and those answers have helped keep me on the coaching “rails” when competing interests arose.

My own personal answers to the “big” coaching questions are unimportant. But in addition to recommending that you take the time to write down your coaching philosophy, I urge you today to also ask yourself why. Why do you coach?

I am confident that both avenues of self-examination will lead you to some interesting and valuable conclusions that will make you a better and more self-aware coach.

Than you for the opportunity to share this day with you.

Jeff Johnson