Preseason Conditioning for Track & Field: Ten Tips
by Chris Saunders  1/14/2004

The outdoor track season may be months away, but that doesn’t mean that you can’t get a jump-start on the competition. If you really plan on excelling in the sport, you’ll need to push yourself during the crucial months leading up to the start of the season. Cross country runners know the importance of building a base during the summer months—the same can be said for the winter season and track and field athletes.

The work that you put in now will pay off when it really counts—during the season. Besides the obvious benefit of being in great shape when the season starts, you will also avoid annoying problems like shin splints and sore muscles that are caused when you suddenly transform yourself overnight from a coach potato into competitive high school track athlete.

If you gradually build up your level of fitness over several months, you will be feeling great when your coach starts putting you through the paces at the beginning of the season. The conditioning level will carry you through your season and hopefully on into the championship phase of the season. Here are ten tips that will help you get an edge on the competition this off-season:

Communicate with your Coach
Remember that a good athlete-coach relationship starts with communication. Talk to your high school coach about off-season conditioning. They most likely have a conditioning program that they would like you to follow or can tailor one to fit your needs. If they don’t have a plan for you—simply ask for some guidance.

Are you ready to start? - If you’re a two-sport athlete and just finished your season, you might benefit from some time off. A good rule of thumb is to take two or three weeks completely off after your season is over. This will give your mind and your body and much needed break—and you’ll be fired up to get start training for track season.

Training Partner - Find another teammate that is as motivated as you are. Skill level is not as important as having someone to push you through those cold and windy days and those long sessions in the weight room. Besides, you’ll have a lot more fun working out with a friend.

Set Goals - Your sport is obviously important to you, or you wouldn’t be willing to spend all of this extra time in the off-season. Set both short and long-term goals. An example of a short-term goal might be practicing for an hour five times a week. Your long-term goal may be placing in the conference track meet in May. Writing your goals down will help to keep you motivated and give your training meaning.

Start Gradually - Don’t try to win the state meet in the first week of conditioning. Remember that training is a gradual process. Your body needs time to adapt to changes in intensity. If you have been sitting in front of the television for two months, you may not want to attempt your favorite ten-miler in the first week. For runners, it is a good idea to increase your training mileage by no more than 10% a week.

Eat Smart - If you are going to put all this time in training, make sure you are putting the right things into your body. You should be eating a balanced diet, and drinking plenty of fluids to stay hydrated. Don’t get obsessive about this, but you know the difference between a Big Mac and a granola bar.

Take Rest Days - You can get in great shape without having to workout everyday. Your coach will take care of daily workouts when the season starts. Start working out every other day, and build up to five or six days a week. However, it is important both physically and mentally to take a day or two off each week.

Experiment - If you have always wanted to try an activity that you feel will give you a good workout, now is the time to do it. Whether it’s cross training, swimming or playing hoops—give it a try. You won’t have the luxury of choosing when the season starts.

Work On Weaknesses - The things that you dislike doing the most are probably the things that you need to be doing the most. If box jumps will increase your vertical jump and get you over high jump bar—make sure you spend some time focusing on that area. Maybe it’s just overall strength, and you hate the weight room. Try to push yourself to work on these areas that you like to avoid.

Have Fun - Most important tip of all—have fun! You only have four years of high school track, so work hard and try to get the most out of the experience.
OFF-SEASON TRAINING--Is there such a thing?
by Cathie Twomey Bellamy

It is hard to believe that there is actually more time between the cross country season and the start of the track & field season than there is between track and the start of cross country. We think of summer as the lazy time when school is over and sleeping in takes its place.

Well, off-season really does not mean summertime because the summer months are normally spent getting ready for the upcoming cross country season. What can be counted as the off-season are those dreary winter months when cross country training and racing halts for an appropriate length of time and then shifts to base work for track & field.

What to do during this period is the subject of much debate and some controversy. Some states have their high school federation guidelines to follow which curtail organized, formal practices and leave the athletes to fend for themselves while others can work with a very small number of athletes at one time. What is considered conditioning vs. training is a very vague area and one that many coaches do not want to deal with.

Some athletes choose to do a winter sport such as basketball, wrestling or swimming while others look to bridge cross country and track with off-season type training.

November through February is a great time to address foundation work. This block of time can be used to work on mileage and strength running as well as a return to weight training. Runs done over hilly terrain as well as hill repeats are a great way to work on the anaerobic end of the continuum without doing track intervals, something that can hammer the musculo-skeletal system and, oddly enough, get the young athlete in too good of shape too soon.

Winter is also a good time to build in the anaerobic threshold work--aka, tempo work--something that is difficult to do while in the middle of a competitive season. Tempo work can be done as simply as setting out on a run and inserting 20:00 at an elevated pace within that run; or, it can be done over hilly terrain where the effort is sustained over rolling hills for the designated 20:00. Either way, one should be aware of keeping the heart rate in the 85% range and not ever feel the run to be as stressful as racing.

Plyometric work and agility drills can also be done at this time, within a fun, progressive workout that addresses muscles not ordinarily used in distance training, thus awakening the neurological pathways and getting them to fire rapidly.

The basic idea for the off-season is to work on building strength and covering all bases by addressing weaknesses in a relaxed block of time when competition is not looming.

At Marist High School, I recommend all athletes take a complete break from training for at least 2-3 weeks at the end of the cross country season.

After that break, they will meet to run regularly, slowly building mileage over the winter. Some runs will be done over hilly terrain while others are done on a flat, bark chipped, trail. Added dimensions, such as circuit drills, plyometrics and stadium stairs are incorporated one or two times weekly to help keep the training spiced. Timed intervals are not done during this phase of training.

Most high school athletes are not experienced enough to be able to handle the mental tenacity of a full year's worth of intense training. Thus, the winter months are used for more of a relaxed, strength building phase.

Abdominal strengthening is a major part of this training since core strength is vital to strong, proper biomechanical running. We do a variety of group abdominal exercises as well as leg-strengthening exercises for the abductors and adductors. Many times these areas are overlooked thus creating weaker finishes with lackluster accelerations. Shifting to multiple gears requires great strength. These exercises address this need.

**Bottom line:** November through February is a time for both the coach and the athletes to relax and have fun with less intense training. Shifting the focus of training helps to keep attitudes and body fresh.

[About the author: During her competitive career, Cathie Twomey Bellamy was one of the best and most versatile runners in the United States. A veteran of three U.S. Olympic Trials finals, in events from the 1500 to 10,000, Twomey Bellamy also ran the marathon in the '87 World Championships and was a member of the gold-medal winning U.S. team at the '84 World Cross Country Championships. She is now the co-head track coach and head cross country coach at Marist High School in Eugene, Oregon. Over the past 7 years, her athletes have won dozens of league championships and 3A state titles from 400 to 3000 meters on the track, and her cross country teams are perennially among the best in Oregon.]
Strength Training
by Jonathan Cane

Just because you can’t go south for the winter, it doesn’t mean your fitness has to. In fact, the off-season is the perfect time to diversify your training, have some fun, and heal nagging injuries. Instead of trying to keep your running mileage at its peak over the winter, use this time to broaden your horizons while improving your flexibility, strength and overall conditioning. Here are some ways help rejuvenate physically and mentally, leaving you ready for a 2004 season full of personal bests.

Staying Fit in the Off-Season

While yoga and Pilates can improve strength, if you’re looking for the most efficient and effective way to build stronger muscles, get thee to a weight room. A couple of sessions per week with free weights or machines may not transform you into a future governor of California, but it will be enough to help you develop stronger muscles, which will let you power up hills, quiet your screaming quads as you speed through steep descents, and drive you through sprints. More importantly, strength training can help you avoid common injuries like tendinitis, muscle strains, bursitis, and muscle imbalances, which could otherwise keep you on the sidelines.

A warning to gung-ho types: Save your competitive streak for the roads, not the weight room. Your strength-training goal is get stronger—not to show off. As with any new activity, get some basic instruction. Health clubs offer one-on-one training sessions, which should instruct you in avoiding common form bugaboos like holding your breath, restricting range of motion, and using momentum let you push more weight. These maneuvers not only limit a workout’s effectiveness, but also increase your chances of getting hurt. Slow, controlled movements maximize muscle fiber recruitment and minimize risk.

Upper Body: How to develop the perfect sprinter's upper body, thanks to Linford Christie. By John Shepherd

Upper body? But you sprint with your legs, surely? True enough, but a sprinter neglects strength in the upper body at his or her peril. Dynamic arms and torso add an additional explosive weapon to the sprinting armory. As an indicator of upper-body strength, many top male sprinters can bench well over100 kg. And both male and female athletes will also include in their weights workouts upright rows, press in front and behind the neck, dumbbell flies and so on - as well as literally tens of thousands of bodyweight circuit exercises.

The emphasis on the upper body in sprinting can mainly be traced back to Alan Wells (1980 Olympic 200m champion). He developed an extensive dynamic upper-body routine using a boxer’s speed ball as a central feature. To this he added extensive blocks of circuit work involving such exercises as ‘chinnies'(pull ups) and push-ups. More recently, of course, Linford Christie has taken the art of upper-body conditioning to new levels. Not surprisingly, because of his immense international success, many other athletes around the world have begun to emulate his awesome upper-body development.

Now that Britain's most successful athlete is coaching, you can readily see his trademark arm and torso emphasis being reflected in the developing physiques of the athletes he coaches - for instance, Jamie Baulch (400m) and Darren Braithwaite (100 and 200m). I recently watched Braithwaite undertake one of Christie's upper-body sessions, and in doing so gained a real insight into the hard work that goes into conditioning for an event that lasts a bare 10 seconds.

First I asked Braithwaite why there was a need for a powerful upper body. A dynamic arm drive is essential, he said, at the start, middle and end of a sprint race.

The start and pick-up

As Braithwaite explained, the rearward drive of the arms behind the body as it accelerates from the blocks will add to the exaggerated drive of the legs and will also help keep the athlete low - all required for a quick getaway. Great power is needed by the sprinter to accelerate rapidly and a vigorous arm drive will contribute to this and prime the athlete for the pick-up, mid and end phases of the race.
Mid-race, the sprinter will most probably be on top of his or her form and should feel in total control. Braithwaite emphasized that at this point the arms and legs should be working in perfect harmony. 200m and 400m runners may actually concentrate on arm movement mid-race in order to stay relaxed - hunched shoulders will cramp their ability to do this.

The finish

When form begins to fade (particularly over 400m), a concentration on a purposeful and long arm drive can help prevent the inevitable shortening of stride length that often ensues. Only a well-conditioned one-lapper will be able to drive the arms purposefully at this stage. Power and endurance are required - lactic acid can build up in the arms as much as in the legs.

The torso - abs and back

Throughout the sprint, abs and back muscles will be working as a kind of strait-jacket to allow for maximum power transference between upper body, legs and track. If the torso is weak, then lateral movement can occur and waste valuable effort. The sprinter needs all the powerful available to go straight down the track. No wonder, then, that sprinters complete punishing circuit routines which involve repeated dynamic exercises. Look at Christie himself as he drives for the line, a balanced and rigid upper body, arms punching forward and back, and you'll see the supreme result of such specific conditioning.

Non-sprinters can find out what the torso goes through when sprinting by completing a 30-second burst of stationary arm sprinting. You'll find your body wants to rotate laterally with each arm movement unless you brace yourself mid-region.

Braithwaite's workouts

Athletes like Braithwaite will work on the various muscles in the shoulder, chest, abdominal and back regions by employing weights and circuit routines, sometimes in combination. Some sessions will be heavy, others will be more endurance-based, depending on the time of the training year.

All the exercises that follow form part of Christie's upper-body workouts, used specifically during the conditioning phase, ie, pre-Christmas/indoor season.

Bench press (chest development)

The bench press forms a key part of the sprinter's upper-body workouts - although it must be said that the exercise can be over-done, especially if athletes becomes too concerned with what they can 'bench' rather than with why they are training: for speed. The bench primarily develops the pectorals and triceps but in a plane of movement that is not specific to the sprinting action. Don't regard the bench as the equivalent of the squat for the upper body; although there are positive strength gains, these are less specific to the sprinting action than squatting itself.

Sample part session:
Bench - 25 reps, immediately followed by 25 press-ups. Two minutes recovery, then repeat 4-5 times. Two mins recovery, then same again, but with weight on the bar.
Shoulder press, upright rowing, bent-over rowing - Developing the deltoids, rhomboids and traps, these exercises, like the bench, will generally strengthen the muscles used in the sprinting action. Performing front and rear shoulder press variants will provide the greatest dividend since the deltoids and traps work to pull the arms both back and forwards, as in sprinting. Christie's athletes perform seated shoulder press, which prevents the legs giving any assistance to the exercise.

Sample part session:
Seated shoulder press - 15 x, immediately followed by 15 x upright rowing, immediately followed by 15 x bent-over rowing. Two minutes rest, and repeat as above up to 5 times
Dumbbell work - Dumbbells allow for a more symmetrical body development, since a weaker left arm cannot be overridden by a stronger right one, as can be the case when using barbells. For this part of the session, Braithwaite used various weight dumbbells. The combination of exercises involved sprint arm drives, alternate shoulder press and curls, all done in succession with about 20-30 reps of each exercise. Once again, 4-5 sets would be carried out.

All the examples given here actually formed a part of only ONE strength endurance session as performed by Braithwaite! I would like to thank him for his invaluable help in preparing this article.