

Positive Youth Development Program Nith River Runners

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Abstract

This program will outline the current distance running program along with a plan for adding a life skills or information component to the schedule once every two weeks in the off season. These sessions will focus on issues important to the running athlete and will take the form of an academic based active learning lesson. It is hoped that this training will transfer and help the young athletes prepare for college life, future athletics or a successful career in the workplace. It is interesting to note that the involved youth group is small; however it tends to have a majority of female athletes at a ratio of 6 female athletes to 2 males. Some interview questions and focus group questions along with a self-evaluation will be used to collect data to see if the program is effective. These tools will be used again every three months to make sure the skills are being retained.

Positive Youth Development Program Nith River Runners

My husband Allan and I have both been involved in sports since we were very young. He was a competitive distance runner that ran for the University of Western Ontario and competed in Southwestern Ontario and the Eastern United States. He was also fortunate enough to run in Scotland at Commonwealth Stadium in Edinburgh at the age of 18. His grandfather was no stranger to running; he was David Dick, the only man to have ever beaten Eric Liddell (we have all seen Chariots of Fire). My husband is a Police Officer with the Ontario Provincial Police, part time Professor at a local college, master's runner and a certified distance running coach.

I have been involved in equestrian sport from the age of eleven and was quite successful competing in Western Canada and the United States. I quit riding in 1985 to complete my undergraduate degree, graduating in 1988 and in 1990 I began my career as a Police Officer in Ontario. I ran as part of my training for my sport and started to compete for fun prior to meeting my husband. I also spent a considerable amount of time running to keep in shape for my profession. I am a part time Professor at a local college and I am the President of our family operated distance club. I still also compete in the equestrian field when I have time.

My children have always been very active in sport. My oldest daughter was active in hockey and swimming. My second oldest (son) was also active in hockey, soccer football and baseball throughout his schooling. He still plays some pickup hockey in the area. My youngest two, who are 17 (son) and 16 (daughter), became interested in distance running joining the cross country team and the track and field team at their rural elementary school. It was evident the two of them had a natural talent for running, they had no formal training and it just seemed to come

naturally for both of them. They were also used to seeing Al and I running to keep in shape for work.

In 2006 I took the two youngest to a track and field club in a nearby city. I had looked online and read about this track club and thought they should try it out. The kids practiced and thought it was "okay" so we joined. Not long after my husband was recruited as a volunteer distance assistant coach. I guess it must have been obvious that he had knowledge about running after all he is 6'1" and about 155 lbs.! There was no interview, no application, nothing, it was like abracadabra you are a distance coach!

Al and I always stay with our children when they are playing a sport so we were always at the track. Very soon after the September session began there was a General Meeting for the club. It was requested that all members attend along with their children. We went to the General Meeting and like that I was being recruited for the Board of Directors. I had no previous experience on a Board of Directors for anything and many members at the meeting tried to recruit me for the President's position. I did not put my name in and nobody else did either. We came home that night and my husband and I talked about it. The next practice I was nominated as the President of the club!

This was both a great experience for me and a challenging one at the same time. During my three years as the President we had several highs and lows. We fired two volunteer coaches for inappropriate behavior and because of that implemented mandatory criminal records checks with vulnerable sector screenings for future volunteer coaches. CPR and first aid training were required and there was an application process that included an interview. We also required the person to have knowledge of sport and they needed to be prepared to take some coaching courses if they were successful candidates at interview. The first year the coach was responsible to foot

the bill and in subsequent years the club would cover the cost for the records checks, CPR and first aid training. The club would cover coach training if funds were available. We found that some funds were benefiting coaches for activities that were not sanctioned by the club and a substantial amount of money was being spent needlessly. We got things back on track for the club and got our membership numbers back to a healthy number. We also had a Fastrack program within the club that catered to disabled athletes. Some of these athletes were blind; (from a stroke) others had Cerebral Palsy. One of the mandates of our program was to have the disabled athletes training with the able bodied athletes on the track. We were successful at doing this and this was a great life lesson for all of the athletes involved.

My husband was transferred to a specialized branch within the Police department in 2009 and it was almost impossible to make it to practice sessions with the club. In the late fall of 2009, there was no other choice except for both of us to resign as head distance coach and President of the track club respectively. This caused us considerable grief as the club refused to release my own children so that they could run as independents!

In early 2010 we began our own small distance running club, the [Nith River Runners](#). We joined our Provincial athletic society, [Athletics Ontario](#) so we were covered by insurance and we were contacted by some of the parents as their children wanted to remain with my husband as their coach. At that point there were about eight high school athletes. Three quarters of our athletes at any given time have been, and still are, female which seems rather odd in light of the research that female's dropout rates are higher (DeKnop, Engstrom and Skirstad 1996). We drafted an application package with a waiver and a fee for the training athlete or the competitive athlete (see Appendix "A"). Parents were responsible for paying their own fees to Athletics Ontario for insurance purposes and a \$100.00 training fee for the year or a \$200.00 fee for the

competitive season. Coaching expenses were to be distributed among the number of athletes that attend a meet. This was thought to be a fair way to cover the costs and the parents were allowed to voice their opinions and were in agreement with this.

Al has obtained his Level One and Two sprints and hurdles as well as his Level One and Two distance (with distinction). He just completed his Level Three (national level) distance course and is considered “Trained”. He needs to coach a national level athlete and have a mentor to become Level Three “Certified”. I, on the other hand have taken more of an administrative position in the club being the President and looking after club expenses. The expenses are very low as we use a facility during the winter that does not charge a fee. This is something we can get away with because our numbers are low. Equipment costs are very low because we already have batons, ladders and elastic bands. Many of our distance runs are group runs on the road and if athletes want to run through the local conservation areas the fee is an additional \$100.00 (that they are responsible to cover themselves) for the year. We have a two person Board that consists of the President and the Secretary/Registrar. These positions are voluntary and there is no wage paid. All the club is responsible to pay for is the administrative records checks and the Athletics Ontario membership for the two board members and the Coach. Finally, we will have a website up and running by the New Year and the club is responsible to pay that fee annually and any coaching expenses incurred for the coaches education (if there are funds available).

The program we are introducing will be implemented in addition to the current distance program we run. It will be focused on high school athletes that are running distance events for track as well as cross country. Athletes need to be in high school because they need to be able to train periodically without the coach and they have to be able to complete some of the online program on their own time. If athletes are too young they will not be in a position to complete

the runs without supervision. We are lucky we still seem to be able to maintain interest with our athletes past the critical age of thirteen when many discontinue with the sport. We attribute this to our group approach (Weinberg and Gould, 2007) and the fact we all have fun!

We get together on Sunday mornings at 11:00 A.M. during the high school competitive season. Here in Canada the high school Cross Country high school season goes from the first week in September until the first week of November and the track season begins in April and goes through to the beginning of June. During these sessions the athletes are performing their high school workouts on top of the club workouts so there is only a need to meet once per week. During the club season the team tries to meet at least one night per week and on Sundays. Athletes are given an online schedule so that they can attend a nearby (indoor track in winter) track. Athletes are encouraged to get together to run on an outdoor track or go for a group road or cross country run when the coach cannot be present.

Our decision to add some additional training for the club athletes was made by the group members. Athletes and parents met and were unanimous in their decision to pursue this. The stakeholders are aware of the extra time commitment and one of the member parents has offered a meeting room at their workplace free of charge.

The involved athletes consist of five female athletes between 16 and 18 and two male athletes between 17 and 18. We will integrate a life skills program with some health related information training once every two weeks for a half day as required. The purpose of this program is to educate the student/athletes on the importance of living a healthy life and learn about themselves and the community. The program will be staffed by Al and I and many of the training sessions will be done on a volunteer basis. We have many contacts through our many years in the field. In the past we have had different community representatives like nutritionists,

health experts, Olympic athletes, and former Olympic coaches attend to speak to the athletes. These sessions were very highly thought of and the parents attended and enjoyed them as well. They added a positive youth developmental approach to the young person's training also providing opportunities, services, a sense of belonging and empowerment (National Clearinghouse, 2007).

We would like to build on these initial sessions and add some other avenues as well as some active learning sessions, research and self-assessments to our program. Every second week the group will get together on a Monday evening for this additional session. The session will be from 4:00 P.M. to 7:00 P.M. The purpose is twofold; the first goal of the training is to teach the young athletes and their parents about important aspects that go along with the training of a distance runner. The second goal is that the athletes take home some of the knowledge they gain and can apply it to their own lives. The actual meeting will be a three hour time slot however, the assignment or homework may take some additional time to complete on the student/athletes own time. In the past, in a less formal way, we have had speakers attend on important topics such as nutrition. When the athletes were younger they were too busy fooling around to pay much attention and this was more of a clinic or session for the few parents that chose to stay. These sessions will be testable (just using short quizzes periodically) and in order to maintain an active status in the program student/athletes will need to attend a certain number of them (75%).

One of the main topics we want to address has to do with stress. It is evident here in Ontario that the high schools are putting increasing amounts of pressure on young athletes to make [OFSAA](#) in their sport. The problem with this is that teachers are not necessarily coaches and may have the required three hour coaching course and that is it. We have watched young people peak at grade 9 and run incredible times only to never see them run again. Unfortunately

burnout is a major concern and it appears that club coaches and high school coaches here in Ontario are not on the same page in many cases. High school coaches are totally focused on OFSAA while the club coach is focused on the long term development.

We will also address addictive and unhealthy behaviors such as eating disorders and drug use including steroids. This seems to be on the rise lately and it is important the athletes are aware this is not the way to go. It is also necessary to explain how over exercising can lead to overuse injuries and physical stress (Weinberg & Gould, 2007).

Some of these topics will be dealt with in house so it not necessary to have an expert attend at least at the onset. Al has coach training on this topic and, although I am not an expert, I do have my undergraduate degree in Psychology and have a basic knowledge of stress and how we will try to manage it as a team. We also feel it necessary to educate the parents on the stress aspect as they may be adding stress and not even realize it. If there are issues we are able to call on an expert from the University of Western Ontario that is a sports psychologist to speak at a fee and this is something the parents would have to pay for as it is not included in the athlete's fees. We also have access to a Family Physician that is an expert in stress and he is available for consultation on this as well. He is also able to address related topics such as overuse injuries in conjunction with our team physiotherapist, chiropractor and massage therapists.

We are fortunate to have a small group so we do not need to have any other staff to assist in this program. Since there are two of us we know we both have athletic experience and coaching education (Coatsworth & Conroy 2007) as a base. We both provide our records checks with vulnerable sector screenings to the Treasurer of the Club. We are both Police Officers and are aware of the potential issues that can arise. We do not put ourselves in a position where we are with the athletes one on one. We are concerned with the development of our athletes not

only as runners but as potential effective members of society and therefore our focus is on the positive coach/ athlete relationship with strict rules but the presence of a caring two way relationship (Gould & Carson, 2008). Life skills like self-esteem are important to teach the athletes. It has been shown that coaches that encourage self-discipline and allow the student athletes to participate in decision making had higher self-esteem. Decision making is also paramount to the life skills of leadership, goal setting, academic success and personal responsibility (Gould & Carson, 2008). It is evident with my own children if they are disciplined on the track it follows through to their studies and vice versa. Further it is now known through the research that life skills must be “taught” they are not simply learned by osmosis (Hodge, 1988, as cited in Gould & Carson, 2008).

The relationship the athlete has with the coach is paramount and these youth’s get along great with each other and the coach. It is obvious they know he cares about them and the environment is a safe one to be in. I have denied some youth from participating in both of the clubs I have been the President of. It is unfortunate but we have to ensure our athletes are safe and there was one occasion where an individual tried to join the last club we were involved in (Larson, Eccles and Gootman, 2004). His guardian who would have been bringing him to practices was known to me from my employment and I could not in good faith have the guardian near my other athletes. I advised him we were unable to accept him in the club.

The majority of the training with these athletes to date has been in the area of skill acquisition or process goals. Much of what has and is being worked on is to perfect the technique of running. This program will integrate the life skills development in the hopes that the youth will develop positive psychosocial development. Petitpas et al advise this growth is likely to occur if certain conditions are met: the activity must be desired and in an appropriate

context or environment, they need to be intrinsically motivated and feel they are important voluntary contributors to the group; the adults must be caring mentors and this group includes the parents as well as the group or community (external assets) ; the athletes must be in a position to learn skills that will be applicable to their lives (internal assets) and finally they need to be able to benefit from evaluation and research (Petitpas et al, 2004). This is where it is beneficial to see if the program is delivering what it is meant to deliver. This does not stop when the program is finished it needs to be re-evaluated to ensure the athletes are retaining the knowledge they have acquired.

The first step we will take to implement the life skills portion of the athlete's education is to ensure they are keeping a log or journal. This is something that is required to monitor not only the athletic workout but to make sure the athlete is journaling how they feel in a reflective exercise (Camire, Forneris, Trudel & Bernard, 2011). Life skills can be taught while reflecting as a group. Athletes can reflect on the father who is screaming at his child on the sidelines because she did not perform up to standards. These "teachable moments" are good times to take advantage of and inevitably one can transfer them to other things in life like work or school.

Athletes will be asked to participate in a somewhat structured focus group (Gupta, 1999) to find out what they believe fair play, good sporting behavior and character are (see Appendix "B"). They will also be asked if and how these behaviors are deterrents to negative behaviors. Athletes will also be given a survey that they can complete online and anonymously. The survey will ask some questions and the athletes will be able to answer using a Likert scale (Gupta, 1999). Athletes will also be given some ethical dilemmas to deal with in their group with the coach and a self-assessment to complete regarding their progress for the year (see Appendix "D").

The coach will complete a report card on each athlete's progress annually. This is something that I did when I was instructing equestrian sport and the athletes and parents loved it. It addressed the level the athlete was at and what the next steps were as far as coaching. This seemed to be a real motivational tool and each year athletes looked for the December report card. It also took parents minds off of winning because performance and process goals were the focus (see Appendix "C").

In order to determine the effectiveness of the program in life skills it is necessary to collect data. Since the group is so small the data will not be generalizable necessarily to larger groups. It is necessary that the results be measured after the program is finished and in this case we will implement the surveys every three months (with the exception of the coaches report card that will only be prepared annually) so the data can be compared. The use of qualitative and quantitative assessments will be used. The follow up assessment is even more important than the initial one (Izzo et al, 2004). With this particular group since it is so small and there is no control group to compare to it will be necessary to measure at least twice in the year and compare the group to itself using the "interrupted time series design" (Cook & Campbell, 1979, Granger 1998 as cited in Izzo et al, 2004).

At the end of the one year period, and beforehand if it is obvious changes need to be made, we will determine if the program is beneficial and decide whether it needs to be tweaked or discontinued. It is our hope that the program will be helpful in teaching our athletes how to compete or "strive with" rather than sink into decompetition (Shields and Bredemeier, 2009). Parents and athletes will both be asked for their feedback on the program twice in the year as well to see if they feel it is advantageous to continue (see Appendix "E")

In conclusion, it is hoped that the athletes and parents will benefit from the addition of these extra sessions. Our goal is to make your athletes experience in sport an enjoyable one.

The focus is not to win at all costs but to have fun, learn something, make friends and be fit.

Appendix "A"

NITH RIVER RUNNERS REGISTRATION 2013**PLEASE PRINT:**

Surname _____ First Name _____
 Date of Birth _____
 Address _____
 City/Town _____ Province _____
 Postal Code _____ Home phone # _____
 Parent/Guardian's names (if applicable) _____
 Cell phone #(s) _____
 Email address _____
 Family Doctor's name: _____ Phone # _____
 Any medical information that the Coach needs to be aware of (allergies, injuries, conditions, medications)

Program Selected: Competitive _____ \$200.00/yr Non Competitive _____ 100.00/yr
 Fees are due on 1Jan of each year or prior to the first practice.

MEDICAL/INFORMATION PRIVACY RELEASE FORM**EMERGENCY MEDICAL ATTENTION (MINOR):**

- In the event that emergency health care is required, I hereby give my permission for the attending medical staff to administer the medical procedures they deem necessary for the wellbeing of my child.
- In order that my son or daughter is permitted to participate in the Nith River Runners, I the undersigned authorize the coach or designated appointee, in the event of accident or illness affecting my son or daughter, to authorize any medical procedures on my behalf. This action is only to be taken when immediate contact with the undersigned cannot be made. I also permit the Nith River Runners to release information to their insurance agent as required.

ATHLETE INSURANCE OBLIGATIONS:

- Further, I realize that I am obligated to be a member as a non-competitive athlete with Athletics Ontario if I am going to train with the club. If I am going to **compete** as a Nith River Runner I must be a competitive member of Athletics Ontario as well as a Competitive athlete (see above for pricing) with the Nith River Runners. My Athletics Ontario fees are my obligation as an athlete (parent or guardian) to be paid directly to that organization. The Coach of the Nith River Runners needs to be provided with the Athletes "AO" number for insurance purposes.

FREEDOM OF INFORMATION AND PRIVACY ACT:

Pursuant to section 39(2) of the Freedom of Information and Privacy Act, you are hereby notified that your personal information recorded on this form is being connected for the purpose of:

- Assisting the participant in the event of an emergency,
- Mailing information pertaining to the club,
- Use of information as required by the Nith River Runners, Athletics Ontario and Athletics Canada.
- Pictures/videos may be used from time to time for the website. If you do **not** want your athlete photographed for the website please initial here_____

This form must be signed by a parent or guardian if the athlete is under the age of eighteen at the time of registration.

I have read the above information and give my permission for my son or daughter to participate with the Nith River Runners for the 2012 calendar year.

Signature of Athlete _____ Date _____
Signature of Parent or Guardian (if applicable) _____

NITH RIVER RUNNERS LIABILITY RELEASE FORM

****THIS AFFECTS YOUR LEGAL RIGHTS PLEASE READ VERY CAREFULLY****

IN ORDER TO BE ACCEPTED AND ALLOWED TO PARTICIPATE AS A MEMBER OF THE NITH RIVER RUNNERS I HAVE READ AND AGREE TO THE FOLLOWING:

- **I UNDERSTAND THAT PARTICIPATING IN TRACK AND FIELD OR DISTANCE RUNNING CAN INVOLVE PERSONAL RISK OF DAMAGE OR INJURY TO THE PARTICIPANT NAMED HEREIN.**
- **BY SIGNING BELOW I ASSUME ANY RISK OF HARM OR INJURY WHICH MIGHT OCCUR TO THE PARTICIPANT DUE TO THEIR PARTICIPATION IN THIS ACTIVITY. I, EITHER AS THE ADULT ATHLETE OR THE PARENT OR GUARDIAN OF A MINOR RELEASE THE NITH RIVER RUNNERS AND ITS EXECUTIVE AND COACH(ES) FROM ALL CLAIMS FOR DAMAGE OR INJURY THAT MIGHT RESULT FROM PARTICIPATING IN THE PROGRAM SAVE AND EXCEPT THOSE DAMAGES AND OR INJURIES THAT MAY BE CAUSED SOLELY BY THE NEGLIGENCE OF THE NITH RIVER RUNNERS, ITS EXECUTIVE MEMBERS OR COACH(ES).**
- **THE MINOR HAS MY CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN THE RUNNING ACTIVITIES AND TRAINING PROGRAM ASSOCIATED WITH THIS ACTIVITY. THIS MAY INCLUDE OTHER FITNESS ACTIVITIES THAT THE ATHLETE IS REQUIRED TO DO ON THEIR OWN TIME.**
- **I FURTHER PROVIDE MY CONSENT TO THE NITH RIVER RUNNERS TO SEEK EMERGENCY TREATMENT FOR THE MINOR ATHLETE IF NECESSARY.**
- **I AGREE TO ACCEPT FINANCIAL RESPONSIBILITY FOR THE COSTS RELATED TO THIS EMERGENCY TREATMENT.**
- **I WILL BE SOLELY RESPONSIBLE FOR MAKING ARRANGEMENTS FOR TRANSPORTATION TO NITH RIVER RUNNER PRACTICES, COMPETITIONS AND EVENTS AND WILL ADVISE THE NITH RIVER RUNNERS IN WRITING IF THERE ARE ANY CONCERNS, SPECIAL NEEDS OR ARRANGEMENTS THAT MUST BE MADE.**

ATHLETES AGREEMENT TO PARTICIPATE IN TRACK AND DISTANCE RUNNING (ROAD RACING AND OR CROSS COUNTRY)

ATHLETES MUST AGREE TO:

- **SHOW A POSITIVE ATTITUDE AND BE A GOOD SPORT.**

- **CONTROL YOUR EMOTIONS AT ALL TIMES.**
- **PAY ATTENTION TO COACHING INSTRUCTIONS AND DIRECTIONS.** If you have trouble, ask for help.
- **WEAR PROPER FOOTWEAR;** again if you do not know if the footwear is still functional, ask.
- **MAKE SURE YOU ARE FOLLOWING THE WORKOUTS THAT ARE SENT OUT. IF YOU DO NOT YOU MAY NOT BE IN PROPER CONDITION TO PARTICIPATE IN THE NEXT WORKOUT.**
- **ADVISE THE COACH OF ALL INJURIES EVEN IF MINOR AND YOU DO NOT THINK THEY WILL AFFECT YOUR PRACTICE OR COMPETITION.**
- **MAKE SURE YOU GET ENOUGH REST.**
- **DO NOT RETURN TOO SOON AFTER AN INJURY.**
- **LET THE COACH KNOW IF YOU ARE PARTICIPATING IN OTHER SPORTS AND WHAT YOU ARE DOING IN THAT SPORT. THIS WILL MAKE IT EASIER TO SET COMPLIMENTARY WORKOUTS.**

REMEMBER YOU ARE REPRESENTING THE NITH RIVER RUNNERS BOTH AT PRACTICES AND COMPETITIONS. IT IS IMPORTANT THAT YOUR BEHAVIOUR IS APPROPRIATE. IF AN ATHLETE VIOLATES ANY RULE AT A COMPETITION, THEY WILL BE SCRATCHED FROM COMPETING AND THEY MAY BE SENT HOME AT THE ATHLETES OWN EXPENSE.

BY SIGNING THIS FORM, I ACKNOWLEDGE HAVING READ, UNDERSTOOD AND AGREED TO THE ABOVE CONDITIONS, RELEASE AND WAIVER.

DATE:_____ **PRINT NAME**_____

SIGNATURE OF ATHLETE: _____

DATE:_____ **PRINT NAME:** _____

SIGNATURE OF PARENT OR GUARDIAN: _____

EMERGENCY CONTACT NAMES: _____

EMERGENCY CONTACT #'S _____

PLEASE STATE RELATIONSHIP TO ATHLETE: _____

Appendix “B”

Focus Group Outline:

What is good sporting behavior?

What does fair play mean to you?

Does sport help a person build character?

Individual Questions to be submitted via anonymous survey online using the following Likert Scale.

1 ---Never

2 – Rarely, in less than 10%

3 – Occasionally, about 30%

4 – Sometimes, about 50%

5 – Frequently, about 70%

6 – Usually, about 90%.

7 – Always

.

Have you ever felt burnout?

Does the coach pressure you to perform?

Do your parents pressure you to perform?

Are you running because you enjoy it?

Are you running because of parental pressure?

Are you running because of coach pressure?

Have you ever been concerned about your weight?

Have you practiced or raced when you have been injured and if so why?

Have you ever taken drugs?

Do you like racing?

Do you think about the final result or just that you do the best you can on that day?

Do you feel like you have to win?

Appendix "C"

The Report Card

1. The athlete takes responsibility for his or her actions?

2. The athlete trains independently when not at practices?

3. The athlete takes initiative in the group setting?

4. The athlete is organized and on time for practices and meets?

5. The athlete is a team player despite the fact the sport may be more of an individual one?

6. The athlete sets realistic performance goals and perseveres?

7. What level is the athlete performing at?

8. Does the athlete need to work on a specific skill or skills?

9. Coaches overall assessment.

Appendix "D"

Athlete Self-Assessment

1. What are my short term goals for 2013?

2. What are my long term goals for 2013?

3. Did I reach my goals for 2012? If not why didn't I reach them? Were they realistic?

4. How was my overall performance in 2012?

5. Am I going to do anything differently in the upcoming year? If so, what?

[illegible]

6. Is there anything else I think the coach needs to know?

[illegible]

Appendix “E”

Answer the following online questions

1. Has the life skills and information program been beneficial to your athlete or to you as an athlete? Why or why not?
2. What can we do to improve the program?
3. Are there any topics you would like to see addressed?
4. Please provide any feedback you think may help us with the program in the future?

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