

Motivating the Track Athlete:

Walking the Line between Optimism and Realism

By Jason Trook on October 26, 2017

Track has always been a very cut and dry sport. The fastest times win and advance. That has been an advantage track coaches enjoy over team sports. When parents question your decisions you can just look at times. When athletes question their position on the team you can just look at times. It usually makes my life easier to have times from meets recorded. It becomes an issue sometimes when I need to be motivational.

I have been reminded several times this season that I work with teenagers, who have fragile egos and need reassurance. Sometimes the easy access to meet results can be discouraging. Sometimes it can make you over-confident. When you go into the district meet and you know your time is the fastest or you know your time is the slowest, it changes the way you prepare. **Our job as coaches is to make sure every athlete is preparing to compete at the highest level that they can.** This isn't rocket science, but here are the effective ways I've come up with to motivate my athletes.

Finish strong!

After six or seven meets occur, it is now time to finish strong. This is a life skill, not just an athletic skill. Regardless of the outcome, encourage athletes to finish the season doing their best. This year, I had a participant who had worked hard all season to improve upon time in the 100- and 200-meter run. They made considerable strides, but still wasn't fast enough to make finals at the district meet. Before their race I complemented their hard work, this year and passed along a reminder that this was the last opportunity to show how much they had improved. In the end, they ran a great race and was satisfied with her performance.

Every point counts!

For our athletes that can finish fifth or sixth, this is a rallying cry. District championships are won and lost on the fifth- and sixth-place finishers. These athletes are crucial to being a successful team. Scoring points at the district meet is a focus of many of our athletes going in. They may know that they don't have the fastest time, but they can contribute to team success. Several years ago, I was working with a team that had a very good chance to win the district championship. As a math teacher, I had looked at all the points and knew it would come down to a point or two. Going into the mile, it looked like we needed one more point. One of our freshman milers took up the challenge. That runner finished sixth, running one of their personal best times. After the meet as we held the trophy, that runner was congratulated for their contribution to our win.

Catch someone!

Working hard to catch someone who has posted faster times is always a great motivator. The week or two leading up to district, and the week before the area and regional meets are when this works best. We tell runners that working hard has made them better all year. Why stop now? We have several quotes posted in our locker rooms and in our offices. One of them says, **"Don't get beat because you didn't work hard."** We have tried to create a culture where our athletes are working hard every day. Trying to catch someone who is a little faster is great motivation. I may or may not tell them that the other runner probably isn't working as hard as they are. As often as we have athletes content with their times, we have a kid trying to beat it.

Leave no doubt!

The handful of kids we have going into meets with the fastest times need a little different motivation. We don't want them to be satisfied. They become the target of those behind trying to catch them. If you are the fastest, then your job is to work hard and prove to everyone why you are the fastest. It also helps that the area, region and state meets loom ahead. You are not just trying to win district, you are trying to get faster for next week, and the next. One of our distance runners exemplifies this perfectly. They have been one of the fastest mile and two-mile athletes in our district for two years. At the district meet, that runner asked me what their goal needed to be in the two-mile. I told them they needed to run like she was at the regional meet. It was about their time, not just the competition. She won the two-mile easily and is ready for the next challenge. Someone asked that runner if she would run the mile hard or try to conserve for the mile relay, and the response was great. Their answer was simple: "Those I'm running against next week won't be conserving their energy."

Motivation is a tricky thing. The basis of it all has to be your relationship with your athlete. Make sure they are appreciated for what they do, and that they are challenged to do even more.

Say something positive to every athlete every day