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discipline

Discipline — An Outdated Concept?

by Vern Gambetta

American Track and Field is happy to welcome to our pages Vern Gambetta, who has played a leading role in the development of modern sports training. A graduate of Fresno State University (B.A., 1968) and Stanford (M.A., 1974), he has devised training systems for world-class athletes and teams in Major League Baseball, the National Football League, the National Basketball Association, Major League Soccer, and many other sports, including, of course, track and field. From 1977-1982, he headed the women's track and cross-country programs at UC-Berkeley. Perhaps most importantly for track and field readers, Vern was the first director of USATF's Coaching Education Program (featured in our Summer, 2005 issue), which has provided advanced-level training to more than 20,000 American coaches at all levels of track and field.

Spend a lot of time with friends who are coaches. Invariably the topic turns to today's athletes, and to one question: "Are they different?"

They certainly are different in many ways from the athletes of 1969, when I started coaching. But the biggest differences are not in the athletes themselves, but in the society we live in.

One of those differences has been a breakdown in discipline. Discipline is the foundation for excellence, and self-discipline is the highest form of discipline.

Of course, for youngsters to learn self-discipline they must have guidance: what is right, and what is not right? That guidance takes the form of rules.

Coaches today have become reluctant to set rules, because then they must enforce them. That could be uncomfortable. What if a parent challenges them?

Will they receive backing from the administration, from the school board, the principal, the vice-principal, and the athletic director? That's certainly a legitimate concern, when anything from an attack by a parent to the coach's job to a lawsuit could be at stake.

My conversation with various coaches who have been coaching for more than 20 years indicates that such backing from the school system, or lack of it, is the basic problem.

Coaches believe in discipline just as they always have, but they do not have the backing they used to have. Younger coaches are reluctant to set rules and enforce discipline because they will not be popular and they know they will not be backed.

What is the answer?

Sport is not isolated from society; it is a microcosm of the society in which we live. So it is naïve to think that the problems that exist in society will not exist on our track teams.

For the young athlete to learn discipline demands guidance. We as coaches must provide that guidance. We must set the standards by fair rules that carefully lay out the behavioral expectations involved in being part of the team. These must be written. They must be clear so that there is no room for debate. Essentially as the coach you are providing a structure to begin to improve their abilities and their enjoyment of track and field.

I think many of today's athletes crave the structure we can give them, even though it may not be part of their everyday life outside of sport. But they have to

discipline

understand that it's a two-way street – that they can't just follow the rules they like, but sometimes they must obey rules they don't like. That's the price they have to pay for the structure the coach provides.

Discipline is a responsibility of coaching. If we do not enforce discipline then we are shirking our duty as coaches.

We must understand that we are not coaching track and field; we are coaching young men and women who are competing in track and field. We owe it to them to provide the most positive experience that we can. Through firm and fair discipline we can create a favorable learning environment that will allow them to reach their potential.

How can we do this? We can start by getting everyone on our side.

You and your coaching staff should decide on the behavior that you expect of your athletes and then set the rules that will define those behaviors. Review them

with your athletic director and if need be, the principal. Get them to buy in and support you before any challenges are made.

It might be even better if you can get your athletic department to set rules that members of every team at your school must observe, to insure consistency from sport to sport.

To those general rules, you can add rules specific to your sport. And if you feel comfortable doing so, you might want to involve the senior athletes and the parents in the process. If they're part of the process, it's easier for them to buy in.

Once the rules are set, schedule a mandatory parents' meeting to go over the rules and responsibilities for their youngsters to be on the team. This meeting should also educate the parents to practice procedures, nutrition guidelines, lettering policy and criteria for varsity selection. Take the opportunity to educate the parents about the sport.

Both the parent and the child must sign a statement that they will observe the rules. If they do not they will not be allowed to participate.

Emphasize that to be an athlete is special. It is a privilege to participate, not a right.

There should also be a pledge from the coaches as to the behavioral standards athletes and parents can expect from the coach. The ultimate goal is to create an atmosphere of mutual respect.

Remember as coaches we have a responsibility to teach our athletes. Very few will compete past the high school level, but they all can have the great growing-up experiences of testing their limits and being part of a team. The beauty of track is that there is a spot for everyone.

Discipline will help insure a positive experience. It is not outdated, and it never will be. ♦

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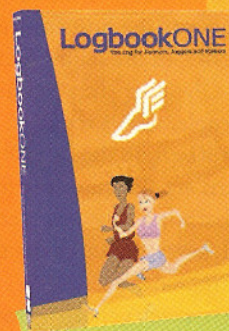
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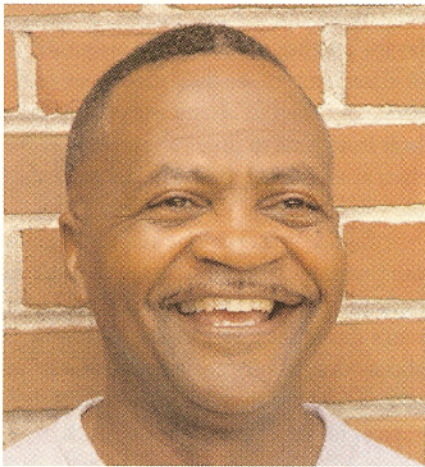
last month?

last year?



Building Team Discipline

by Cyrus Jones, Lincoln University



Cyrus Jones is head coach of track and field and cross country at Pennsylvania's Lincoln University, where he's also athletic director. His track teams have won 16 NCAA Div. III national championships, most recently the 2005 outdoor title. Coach Jones believes team discipline is the key to winning championships. Here are his thoughts on the subject.

Championship teams are not made, they are disciplined.

If a team and its members do not behave in a disciplined way in every aspect of their lives, they are never going to be champions — no matter how much talent they have.

Discipline comes in many forms and we look for all of them at Lincoln University. From the moment we meet an athlete, we tell him and his parents that we must be able to communicate with the entire family. Giving the entire family an understanding of the importance of disci-

pline in the life of an athlete is very important, because family support and expectation of discipline is critical to the development of this discipline.

We tell our athletes that in order to have discipline on the track, they must first have it in many other areas. Discipline must begin from within. The discipline needed for winning starts with taking care of daily business, from being responsible and taking care of small, personal duties on a daily basis.

So when we first meet with our athletes on campus, we do not talk about track and field skills. We start with much smaller things. For example, we look for the discipline they show in combing their hair, in the way they dress for class, and in being on time.

Being on time is especially essential to disciplined behavior. Everyday things such as arriving at class on time and turning in assignments on time are the basic points for us to start off with.

Until we have taken care of these aspects, we don't start talking about training or about becoming a good runner.

As the year progresses, in order for our athletes to carry on the tradition of excellence in our program, we work to instill in them the importance of refraining from negative activities such as drinking alcohol, using drugs, fighting or being a nuisance to the university atmosphere. Even pledging in fraternities and sororities can be a distraction to the serious athlete. Showing restraint in all social activities, and keeping focused on the main goal, athletic excellence, is what we call discipline.

Remember, our objective is to devel-

op a sense of discipline that becomes second nature.

At first, our teams are no different from other colleges and universities. But in time we gain the edge with the sound discipline we instill in them. We often mention to our athletes that we do not have a democratic team, but a instead "full-pledge autocratic organization."

That means Coach knows best and exerts full control over the team's activities, creating a positive, disciplined team culture.

This control is really the love we give to them by controlling their surroundings, making the way for ultimate athletic success. Of course, sometimes it's very difficult, but it's the only way to accomplish the task. Because of the success discipline brings, our athletes at Lincoln University come to truly enjoy the discipline we demand from them.

In order for our athletes to meet our expectations, we spend many hours with them on and off the track. We become the father, mother, sister, and brother. We say that we are the athlete's best friends, yet they do not have to return that best friend relationship. However, we must have the athlete's respect in all forms. There is no substitute for this respect.

Once the athletes begin to stop in our offices before class and after class, a certain feeling of comfort develops, and we know that they are beginning to understand our philosophy and become familiar with our expectations. In these relaxed moments, we let them know that whatever they do, we are interested. Whatever their needs, we are concerned. This is another way we

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discipline

try to nurture discipline in our athletes, by demonstrating true caring and compassion for them.

With a firm discipline and genuine caring, we can see a difference in our athletes by the middle of cross-country season in early winter. Many are totally buying into the program while others are still trying to patch the pieces together. But we can see that it is slowly transforming them. In terms of specifics, what we see and hear is that there is no profanity in our presence; athletes are on time to class and practice; and we hear them talking about class work. Talking about class work is a difficult step toward their becoming disciplined. For some, the struggle with class work is great; but we know, and they come to believe, that success is guaranteed if the disciplined work continues.

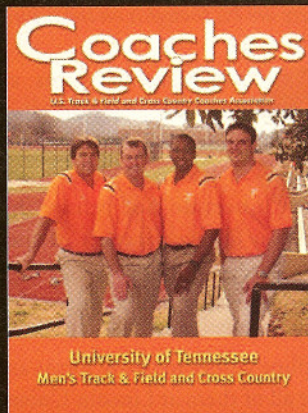
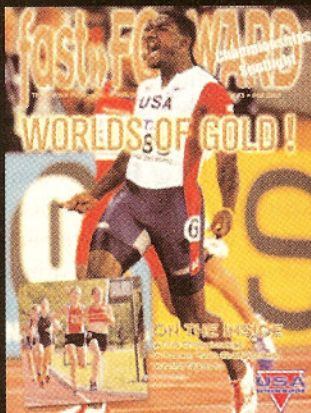
In the end, it's not too hard to get them to buy into our packet, to have faith that this path will lead to success. Most of the athletes are working seriously to achieve that strong disciplined program, and they experience the small daily suc-

cesses, which motivate them. Disciplined work in class leads to success, which the professors notice.

As a matter of fact, discipline for completing academic work is a great way to train for discipline on the track. Effort put forth in class work can produce immediate results, while on the track, it will take time. Therefore, it is best to begin with discipline in the classroom. The support of the coach(es) for each athlete's studies is very important for this reason. It can go far for coaches to look at the assignments of classmates, to see their professors' feedback, and even to attend the class of athletes from time to time. Show support for their academic discipline in the most visible ways.

All this must be done before we get to our first track workout. Again, in order to become a championship team, we must make discipline a way of life. Winning is about the whole package: success in school, success in personal relationships, success in life...success on the track. ♦

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