



THE JOURNAL OF YOUTH RUNNING

AT KELLER HIGH SCHOOL IT'S ALL ABOUT THE RUNNERS, NOT THE CHAMPIONSHIPS

High school cross country in the state of Texas is hugely competitive with The Woodlands (Houston) and Southlake Carroll (Dallas/Fort Worth), both Division 6A schools, routinely ranked alongside the top high school teams nationally. So, when Brian Zaring became cross country coach at Keller High School (Keller, Texas), also a Division 6A school, in 2011, he understood the challenges ahead. Although he had been a runner in high school and had coached other sports, Zaring knew the climb to the top of high school cross country in Texas, to be a contender, may be a long way off.

A short five years later, in 2016, and again in 2017, Keller High School's cross country team won the Texas Division 6A Girls' state title. Coaches everywhere began to take notice. At the 2017 Texas Girls state cross country finals, Keller runners finished 1-2-3 followed by a 5th and 17th place for an unprecedented low score of 28 points (in cross country low score wins). And this was against perennial powerhouse teams, each that were loaded with talent. Coach Zaring was duly honored by the USATFCCCA* as National Girls Cross Country Coach of the Year in 2017.



COACH BRIAN ZARING
**2017 National Girls Cross
Country Coach of the Year**

For many coaches, winning a state championship is a crowning achievement. Coach Zaring does not, however, make winning championships his or the coaching staff's defining moment. "Our defining moment is how many kids can we get involved, how many kids can say with pride they are part of our program." His success is in the numbers. When Zaring stepped in as head coach, the numbers were good by most standards — 42 runners, counting both boys and girls. In 2017, 131 names appeared on the team roster, the equivalent of 18 full teams! This is Brian Zaring's defining moment and the core to his and his runners' phenomenal success.

A ROAD MAP FOR RUNNING

Running in Keller, Texas, like in many school districts across the country, starts in the elementary schools. It is a two- or three-days-a-week mileage-type program with kids running laps around the playground during recess or physical education.

Coach Zaring believes this is all an elementary school running program should be: one where kids can discover running, have fun and become physically fit. Also, locally popular Casey's Kids Family Fun Run, now

* USATFCCCA is the United States of America Track & Field and Cross Country Coaches Association



in its 20th year, "...gives kids something to look forward to and offers them a great opportunity to experience success." A recent addition to the Fun Run is schools competing for a traveling trophy awarded each year to the school with the greatest participation.

In middle school, when cross country and track become team sports, Zaring encourages coaches to introduce their runners to training and competing but avoid strict training regimes that include running lots of miles. The primary goal, he believes, should be on fostering an interest and excitement in running. "Middle school running should be about having fun, learning skills and discovering that running is more than just doing laps," he said. "It also should allow all kids, even the middle-of-the-pack runners, to experience some success." According to Zaring, there is plenty of time to get kids to train hard and compete once they reach high school. "That's my job," he said.

THREE PILLARS FOR SUCCESS

Coach Zaring creates the foundation for his team's success (both boys and girls) by "...offering an environment where kids can find a time and place where they belong, where they can get involved, where they are part of the 'team'; where they can experience both personal and team success. When kids find that niche, that place, where they can be part of something important, team success will follow."

This foundation for success, which is built on three core values and is measured by the number of runners on the team roster, is Zaring's "defining moment." Each pillar supports an environment of inclusion, of his runners being part of something important, of being on the team: No. 1 - Know Why They Run, No. 2 - Every Kids Gets Attention and No. 3 - Create "Community" Through Strong Team Leadership.

"As coaches, our defining moment is not the championships our kids have won, but instead how many kids are on the team; how many found Keller Cross Country a place where they belong. Building this sense of belonging is something we do every day."

Brian Zaring

☑ KNOW WHY THEY RUN

Kids have a reason why they run, and the Keller coaches make it their job to know what that reason is. And whatever reason it is, runners are encouraged to hold on to it, to pursue it. If it is to run on the varsity squad, great. But if it is for fitness for another sport, that's also great. What is important, whatever the reason is, is that they are running, being part of a team, contributing. Zaring understands that old hard and fast rules have been replaced with coaches that are fully invested in their runners. He believes when coaches know what is special to each kid, they (the kids) will feel this sense of investment by the coaches and will soon be invested in the coaches, the team and its success.

☑ EVERY KID GETS ATTENTION

In many sports, 90 percent of the coaches' time and energy is spent on 10 percent of the athletes, the starters. Many kids feel left out, discouraged, not important. At the core of Zaring's commitment to his runners is "Make sure every runner, whether the 15-minute 5K runner, or a 35-minute 5K runner, gets the same amount of love and attention from the coaches," he said. "Keller cross country is a culture where every kid knows they are just as important to the coaches as the kid who wins the state meet."

Zaring's expectations for himself and his coaches are simple: be visible, be available and be reachable, to every kid, all the time. Although easy to say, he admits it can be demanding. But, according to Zaring, coaches who are available to their runners are coaches kids will respond to. It is this sense of relationship, of coaches that care, that cause runners to do the hard work, and what makes the Keller program so successful.

At the end of each season the coaches conduct a 15-minute interview with each runner or with the top runners in a group. The coaches want to know their goals for next season and in school; to open the door to a year-round dialogue, not just during the season and not just about running.

☑ CREATE "COMMUNITY" THROUGH STRONG TEAM LEADERSHIP

In any competitive program, where kids are competing not only with runners from other teams but also with their own teammates, creating a sense of "community" is critical. A community where everyone is working together for common goals, team goals. A community where runners focus on strengthening the team; to not let down their teammates; to be supportive.

Zaring and his coaching staff depend on team captains to be leaders in the field, to reinforce the sense of belonging, to being part of a team. With 131 runners the captains are critical to making this happen.

Captains are not honorary titles given to the top runners. Each team, girls and boys, have five captains. Each captain is assigned 10 or 11 runners.

The captain's job is to foster the team concept in practice and in competition; to support new runners making the adjustment to the demands of the sport and in texting or talking to each runner every day. The election of the captains starts with a weeklong process with the coaches asking kids what type of person and leadership style do they want in a captain? Some captains, of course, are the veterans, the faster runners, while others are middle-of-the-pack runners but whose leadership has earned the confidence of their teammates.



Central to Keller's success is every runner, not just the varsity runners, knows they are special. They know, no matter where they finish, their success is as important to Coach Zaring as the performance of those who cross the finish line first.

APPLYING ZARING'S SUCCESS TO CHILDREN'S RUNNING

Brian Zaring's approach to high school running is a road map for running programs at any level, and especially children's running, those in elementary and middle school.

Applying Zaring's success to children's running means...

1. Creating an interest in running and opportunities for young runners to experience success outweighs in importance the miles run.
2. Fostering an environment where kids can find a time and place where they belong, where they can get involved, where they are part of something special, part of the team.
3. Knowing *Why* each kid runs and encouraging them; sharing with them how what they are doing each day will help them reach their personal *Why*.
4. Making each kid feel important, valuable, a part of the team every single day, regardless of where they finish.
5. Promoting the sense of "team" where kids encourage each other rather than compete against each other, where they have common goals, team goals, with each kid contributing to the team success.



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