

“Building a Championship Program”

Thinking back over my 30 year coaching career, I would like to thank that T-ball coach 41 years ago that never played me. Whether I was simply that bad or not is beside the point; that coach unwittingly pushed me toward a lifetime passion -- track & field. That “failure” led me to a competitive career spanning high school and college track & field, and then to a successful coaching career. Track & field has provided me with some of life’s highest highs and even some of life’s lowest lows; overall it has given me the tools, knowledge, and perseverance to be successful in life and on the track.

This article is meant to provide help or guidance to a new coach coming into the profession and maybe the older coach who is just trying to learn something new. I pride myself and my track program on building a “Championship TEAM.” The word “championship” refers to many things. It refers to the obvious -- league, district, regional, and state titles, but it also refers to producing kids who are successful in school and in life. The term “TEAM” refers to exactly that -- a group of individuals who will put the team goals first. When it comes time to make a run at that league title, they will sacrifice personal glory for the glory of the team. I feel the cornerstones of any championship team are the following.

1) Have a plan and a mission statement

For the last 15 years I have distributed a track handbook. This handbook is the Bible for the John Glenn track & field program. It contains the obvious things such as the schedule, team rules, coaches’ information, and other important items. It also contains our mission statement. “ We believe that the TEAM comes first. We recognize that Track and Field is a highly individualized sport, but the ultimate goal of every meet is to win the Team Championship. As a result, athletes may be asked to sacrifice individual honors to help the TEAM.” We also provide a Philosophy for our program. “In order for the Team to achieve success, every athlete must improve and find some measure of success during the season. Success comes in different forms for each athlete. It may be winning a state championship for one athlete, or setting a personal best in a dual meet. Success is what helps the athlete find and strive towards each and every day. “ These two statements guide my athletes and coaches throughout the season.

2) Pour your heart and soul into the program

Coaching is a lifestyle choice. If you want to just show up on the first practice date and not spend any extra time, your program will probably always be average. To have a successful program, you need to spend the “extra” time with the kids, extra practice time, extra team bonding time, extra time helping that freshman girl go through her first breakup. The bottom line is that coaching is not always about the money. Believe me when I say that I lose money every season with the time and energy I put into my sport and program.

3) Allow different combinations of kids to compete in invitationals and dual meets

Throughout my season, I allow my relays to have different combinations of kids. I also try kids in all kinds of events. I allow that average girl/boy to run at an invitational to give them a chance to compete and try something new. Over the years this has paid huge dividends to the program.

4) Run a successful indoor program

Indoor track & field has become huge at our school. It allows me to try new things with kids, find kids that love to compete, and build leaders for the outdoor season. We don't take it too seriously until the OAT&CCC state meet. We use it as extra practice. Indoor T&F has become the equivalent of summer workouts for football. It's extra time that you cannot get back.

5) Actively teach more than just track

One of the greatest coaches in any sport would be John Wooden. His principles guide me and my coaching philosophy. Every week I give out "Wooden Awards" for things noticed by the coaches or athletes. Each of these tags represents one quality from his pyramid of success. I put the tag on a ring clip and the kids keep them on their backpacks or shoe bags. Kids will try to accumulate a large number of these tags. These tags are earned for things other than how fast they run or how far they throw. They receive a tag for doing something for the good of the team, like being a great leader or stepping in and running the 4x400 when they are sick as a dog. At the end of the year the top two individuals for boys and girls get a beautiful John Wooden Award personally designed by myself. It is the highest award in our program.

6) Allow the kids to have fun

As a high school program, it is important to allow kids to have fun with each other. The John Glenn track & field program is full of laughs, jokes (many times at my expense), and just plain fun. It's nothing for our easy day to break out into a crazy game of kickball or for us to have a dodgeball tournament between sprinters and throwers. This is a great way to bring groups together.

7) Plan team bonding and group activities

We have a wide range of activities from bowling as a team, to team meals, and team campfires. The biggest team bonding activity we do is take an out-of-state trip. We have traveled to Washington D.C., North Carolina, the mountains of Tennessee and even the horse tracks in Louisville. We find a meet at one of these locations, compete at the meet, and then do fun activities after the meet. This is also a great way to get your elite athletes used to traveling and staying in hotels as they will for the state meet.

8) Find those kids that would run through a wall for you

Find those athletes that are all in and build your program around them. They don't have to be your best athletes and they will pull other athletes with them.

9) Become an advocate for your sport

Sell not only your program, but sell your sport. Become involved in your coaches' associations. Work with other coaches to build a summer track circuit. Have open track nights during the summer and include all grades. Attend a track camp with one of your athletes. Talk about the track & field in a positive manner.

10) Teach kids to compete

Many kids are afraid to be all in because they are afraid of losing. Emphasize the importance of competing and giving it their all and place less emphasis on winning. I talk all the time about how scoring anywhere from 1st through 8th place will help us achieve our team goals. When kids learn to compete, winning usually follows.

11) Find assistant coaches that share your beliefs and dedication

Find assistant coaches who are on your wavelength. Look for coaches who put the kids first and that are fun to be around. I will take a less knowledgeable coach that is willing to learn, willing to dedicate themselves to the team, and willing to be all in.

12) Give time off.

Remember that you are working with high school athletes and not the U.S. Olympic team. They cannot physically or mentally go hard every single day. Less is often better. Rest is important to avoid injuries and staleness.

13) Sell your program and communicate with other coaches in your school

Create a bulletin board, have announcements, and have a huge social media presence. Sell your program all the time. Don't sell just the wins or championships. Sell the fun and team concepts. Also, talk to the soccer and basketball coaches and sell your program to them. Track is a great off-season conditioning and speed/power program for those sports.

14) Have team goals

Define team goals so your kids know where they're headed. Give your athletes direction and let them know when a goal is achieved. Our goals are:

Win the MVL Championship

Win District Title/Regional Title

Place an athlete on the medal stand at the State Meet

Score in every event at MVL Championships

Bring a "Team" Approach to JGHS Track

Learn the importance of hard work

15) Recognize and reward the non-star athletes

We all have those average or below average athletes that give you 100% all the time and are committed to the program. Reward these athletes during the year and maybe run them at an invitational in an open event or on a relay with three of your studs. They often rise to the occasion and surprise themselves as well as the coaches.

16) Create a top 10 list

Create a top 10 list for your school. Kids may never be good enough to hold a school record, but to see their name at #9 for an event can drive them and is a source of motivation and pride for them.

17) Create a mindset that the boys' and girls' teams are one team.

Everything we do, we do together. When the girls won the league this year, the boys are in the photo giving the #1 finger. We warmup together, we win together, and we establish our brand and build our program together.



Doug Joy is in his 25th year at John Glenn High School and has coached track for 30 years. He is the current president of the Ohio Association of Track and Cross Country Coaches. Comments, questions or ideas can be emailed to djoy@eastmschools.org. Coaches are invited to submit an article of their own to this same email to be shared by the OAT&CCC and MileSplit.