

CROSS COUNTRY: AN INDIVIDUAL AND TEAM SPORT

Cross country is a popular sport yet there are many misconceptions about what makes up a cross country race and how runners train. Although often labeled as an individual sport, cross country is very much a team sport. Athletes run separately but score points for their team to win the race. Each cross country team that races consists of seven runners. These runners score points based on the place in which they finish. For example, the first finisher scores one point, the second scores two, etc... It is the first five finishers on a team whose points go toward the overall team score. Therefore, the scores of the last two runners out of the seven do not count. In the end, it is the team with the lowest score, or fastest finishers, that wins.

The standard cross country course for men and women at the high school level in most areas is 3.2 miles, or 5 kilometers. At the beginning of a race, runners line up in a large pack and begin running after hearing the starting gun. These runners are coached to save enough energy for the end of the race when they battle it out for a strong finish. A cross country runner's biggest challenge is often the hills he or she encounters on the course. Runners are coached to put their heads down, pump their arms, and pick their knees up as they run up hill.

How someone performs on the hills can often make or break their race.

Some say that cross country runners are the toughest athletes around. They have to be strong mentally and physically to do well in this sport. Sometimes runners log between 30 and 40 miles per week training for races. Running this much can be grueling as runners have to learn to push through pain and injuries such as shin splints, pulled muscles and sore feet. Because cross country runners spend so much time running together and relying on each other for support, cross country runners often become very close with their teammates. Many often wonder why cross country athletes choose a sport like long-distance running, but these athletes find value to the physical challenges that they face as runners. As seen in the movie, *McFarland, USA*, participating in a cross country team has benefits that often outweigh the challenges. In the movie, running gives the boys confidence, a sense of accomplishment, and helps them feel part of something bigger than themselves as they bring pride to their community.

McFARLAND USA AND THE SPORT OF CROSS COUNTRY

Do you have to run for a particular sport or enjoy running on your own? Have you ever run cross country? Why do you think runners need to be both mentally and physically tough?

In the movie, *McFarland USA*, Coach Jim White put together the first cross country team that McFarland High School ever had. He brought together a group of young men who he believed had the potential to be a successful cross country team. These athletes worked hard to overcome obstacles such as fatigue from working in the fields, absence of family support, and lack of quality running shoes.

Cross Country Trivia: How much do you know about the sport of cross country?

1. How many runners make up a team that seeks to win a race?
2. How many of those runners' scores actually count when tallying up a team's point total?
3. How long (in miles or kilometers) is a standard cross country course?
4. Imagine the following: The team from your high school has 10 points and the team from a rival high school has 20 points. Which team wins?