

DO YOURSELF A FAVOR AND... BE A GREAT TEAMMATE

Those people wearing the same uniform as you have a lot to do with your success as a runner

By Don Kardong

To become the best high school miler in history, you'd need to be pretty focused on your training, your times...yourself, right? Well, maybe not. Consider Alan Webb, who last spring broke Jim Ryun's 36-year-old high school mile record with a world-class 3:53.43 performance.

"Alan was always very interested in how everybody on the team was doing," said Scott Raczko, Webb's Coach at South Lakes High School in Reston, Virginia. "He always seemed like he was more concerned about them than about himself."

Webb, who now runs for the University of Michigan, demonstrated this trait at last year's Penn Relays. After anchoring South Lakes to victory in the high school 4 x 800 and distance medley relays, Webb praised his teammates at the press conference afterward.

The team: What a concept. But in a sport where so much of the drama is internal...I can do it, I know I can...or focused on the race winner...Here she comes, she's going to catch that girl in front of her...what do the people who wear the same uniform as you have to do with your success?

Plenty. In those long, lonely miles you put in during the off-season, and in those knife-in-the-gut track repetitions and hill repeats that buckle your knees-at that moment in almost every race when you ask yourself how much you're willing to hurt to catch one more runner-you can draw strength and inspiration from your running mates. Whether it's cross-country or track, teammates make a huge difference.

"It's an individual sport," says Raczko, "but you're still out there every single day with your teammates, trying to make each other better."

Those words certainly resonate with my own experience. Back in my senior year in high school in the early 1960s, I became increasingly distracted by happenings off the track-social events, a girlfriend, and so on. I was wrapping up high school life, and hard training seemed a low priority. My teammates must certainly have been disappointed in me and my times, which were well slower than expected.

That all changed when I went to college and joined the Stanford cross-country team. I found myself surrounded by runners with lofty goals and a willingness to work to achieve them. My times improved immediately. By my sophomore year, the upperclassmen made it clear that they expected team success at the national level, and I worked hard to be part of it. At the end of the season, we entered the NCAA meet as underdogs. Our coach, Marshall Clark, remembers how much group dynamics made a difference.

"That team didn't have a history of success," said Clark, now a high school coach in California, "but it was evident from the start of that season that the runners believed in one another and would succeed."

In the final half-mile of that NCAA cross-country race, I remember suffering worse than I ever had in competition, but I was determined not to let my teammates down. I finished 40th, a quantum leap above where I had been running. Better yet, our team ended up second in the nation.

I was surrounded by a group of terrific runners that season, no doubt about it. But what exactly made them good teammates?

A good teammate is someone willing to get outside of personal thoughts and emotions, a friend who tries to understand, appreciate, and encourage other members of the team.

"Basically, treating one's teammates with consideration and respect is vital to being a good teammate," said Britt Brewer, an associate professor of psychology and the men's cross-country coach at Springfield College in Massachusetts.

There are subtle ways to communicate that you care: Cheer for your teammates, regardless of whether they're fast or slow, veteran or neophyte, varsity or JV. Or rally the spirits of someone who's had a bad performance. Also, encourage stragglers during tough workouts; jog back to "pick up" a runner who's behind during a long run. Share stories, listen to a teammate's problems and worries.

This is the key-concern. Are you concerned about the people you train and race with? Can they sense it, or do they sense something else?

Lack of concern can show up in many ways. At a certain point, seemingly harmless kidding can become cutting. Even encouragement can sound like criticism, as in, "Don't let him beat you!" In addition, even the normal, healthy competitiveness of team members trying to improve can become destructive.

"There's plenty of competition against the other teams without creating more among our own runners," says Wes Player, girls coach at Mead High School in Spokane, Washington. "If two girls on the same team are trying to beat each other in every race, it can wear them out emotionally."

This is probably the trickiest part of being a good teammate. You have to try to move yourself up in team standing. But you also have to support your teammates' efforts to do the same thing.

"Your closest teammate might also be your most heated rival," says Brewer. "As long as the runners remember that they are on the same team, that they have common opponents, and that they should save their racing for meets, situations such as this can elevate their training and improve competition."

So when you beat a teammate in a race, how do you react? Do you gloat? If so, you're sending a negative, self-centered message. Even overreacting to a bad race you've just run—sitting by yourself, moping, crying—can be interpreted as not caring about how the rest of the team has preformed.

Clearly, there are things a runner does, intentionally or not, that disrupt team cohesion. And there are also things a runner doesn't do that can cause problems: not trying, showing up late, skipping team-building activities, and ignoring the coach's instructions.

Do you remember, in good times and bad, to support your training partners? If you lose a varsity spot, or if you're injured and can't compete, do you still show up to cheer for the team? If you know someone has had a bad race, do you call, write a note, or send a gift to let him or her know that you care? Working together as a team is what makes sports so much fun, and we know it helps improve performance. Just ask Alan Webb's coach.

"Alan always wanted to be part of relays, team championships, stuff like that," says Coach Raczko. "I think it energized his teammates to know that a runner of his caliber, who has had so much success individually, would put all that aside to be with them."

And you know what? Being a team member didn't seem to hurt Alan Webb's mile times at all.

A GOOD Teammate...

- * Makes newcomers feel welcome
- * Cheers other runners
- * Attends team functions and social events
- * Accepts the coach's decisions
- * Sends a note or gift to an upset teammate
- * Develops team T-shirts, cheers, songs
- * Joins group warmups, stretches, and cooldowns
- * Shows interest in teammates' problems
- * Organizes group runs during the off-season
- * Sets a good example of right and wrong
- * Is a friend

A BAD Teammate...

- * Disses team members
- * Gloats after a good race
- * Skips workouts, team warmups, group stretches
- * Is overly competitive with others on the team
- * Is absorbed by own performance
- * Runs ahead or behind during a designated group run
- * Goofs off when the coach is not around
- * Arrives late or leaves early from practice or races
- * Undermines the coach's authority
- * Makes excuses
- * Mostly runs alone