

The Steeplechase - Training and Racing

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Training for the steeplechase has many similarities to training for the 1500m/3000m/5000m events. Hurdling presents the additional challenge.

Following cross country season steeplechase training should be divided into two distinct phases. From mid January to mid March speed endurance training is emphasized in the 1500m/5000m ranges with more focus on the 5k threshold and fuel development. In season training from mid March on should emphasize 1550m/3000m type sessions with the focus on 1500m speed and development of lactate tolerance.

Training a steeplechaser to hurdle and water jump properly is a process that should be approached long term. In December the athlete can begin basic hurdling drills once a week to learn technique and go through the initial muscle soreness during a time usually reserved for base mileage.

Hurdling in the speed endurance phase of training over the winter months should emphasize technique, volume and rhythm. Drills can be done at relatively high volume twice a week using a combination muscle memory drills, wall drills and actual hurdling similar to that used by intermediate hurdlers.

Rhythm hurdling can be done at the end training runs every other week by running 800m to 1 mile over 4 hurdles per lap. An example might have the athlete run 6 miles at a medium pace and coming right on to the track for a steady 800m over hurdles at the end of the run.

Intermediate hurdles are used for obvious reasons as they will move when hit – barriers do not. The teacher should emphasize an early take off leading into each hurdle to keep the hip line as flat as possible over that hurdle. The lead leg should also be almost on it's way down as the athlete passes over the hurdle to insure consistent rhythm and spend less time in the air.

Water jumping can also be taught in this phase by placing a barrier at the end of the long jump runway and jumping into the sand pit. A line mimicking the edge of the water can be drawn in the sand the exact distance from the barrier. Coach Kelly Sullivan from Willamette University (Salem, OR) teaches the idea of "float like a butterfly sting like a bee". The runner approaches the barrier fast but relaxed and "stings" the front side of the barrier by rolling the foot over the top and pushing hard off the it's face in one quick movement. The opposite foot

should land on or near the line drawn in the sand with the same foot used on top of the barrier landing beyond the line. Always have your athletes continue to run out of the pit so they learn to run out of the water and not into it.

Hurdling drills during track season stress technique and speed with less volume (once a week). Early season interval sessions can be done over the hurdles at or near goal pace as part of a total training session. A good idea is to alternate one repeat over 4 hurdles per lap with the next on the flat. Entire interval sessions over hurdles are not recommended because of the water and tear on the legs and these sessions often rob from future races. Water jumping in the normal water pit can be done once every other week. Some athletes prefer to use a check mark in training near the bend in the track coming into the water jump area. This allows them to accelerate into and out of the water as opposed to stutter stepping and slowing down. Mid to late season interval training should emphasize lower volume and better speed.

RACING

Ideally, the athlete would race the steeplechase once every 2-3 weeks until he/she is in a situation where one would have to race twice as part of a single competition.

Tactically the race should be approached in a similar fashion to the flat 3000m event with one significant difference – a slower start. The great Kenyan steeplechasers are often very close to their 3k flat pace in the later stages of their steeple races.

It is a good idea to race on the outside shoulder of your opponent and approach the barriers a little wide in traffic. This will help create better visibility and a straighter line over the barriers and water jump with no significant loss of ground.

There are two important times in a steeplechase. The runner should move into racing position just after the mile when many competitors begin to slow and begin a drive for the finish with 700m remaining. This will create good speed over the penultimate water jump and creates a "gathering" period for the bell lap and final kick.

Great steeplechasers are extraordinarily tough and determined athletes with exceptional force of will as well as finely developed skills.

In thirty years of coaching successful distance runners I listened to, read about, or discussed with colleagues the merits and shortcomings of many different types of training programs. Many people, athletes in particular, seemed to spend countless hours discussing the benefits of things like high mileage, intense intervals, and hill training. Everyone was looking for the magic formula that would result in huge improvements and the ability to run at the next level and beyond. I don't know how many people found that magic formula but my observations have led me to believe that many athletes and coaches

spent all that time for nothing because they spent too little time planning two crucial aspects of racing – WARMUP AND COOLDOWN. Very simply, the human body is not ready to race in its' normal state. An athlete is very similar to an automobile; they both become more efficient when they have been warmed up. Everyone knows this and is aware of the fact that during the warm-up the respiration rate increases, the heart beats faster and pumps more blood, the muscle temperature and body core temperature increases and the body begins to efficiently process oxygen that is needed to support extreme effort. These and many other things occur to get the body ready to race and once you get the body ready you want to keep it ready until the race begins. Any thing you do to negate the effects of warm-up (like sitting around –too much time between warm-up and race, allowing the body to cool off) will adversely affect the athlete's performance. Timing is crucial, if you stand around too long after the warm-up you will lose most of the benefits and you will have to warm-up in the first part of the race. By that time the race will be over for you. The second area of concern is how much warm-up is needed. While this will vary according to the length of the race and things like weather conditions it is safe to say that you should feel warmed up. If you have not broken a sweat, if you do not feel the things mentioned above, you might not have warmed up enough. Experimentation will help determine the correct amount of warm-up but as a general guide I would suggest 20-30 minutes of activity with the culmination of activity coming with 10 or fewer minutes remaining before the race. Once the warm-up is finished get racing shoes on, keep moving and be race ready when the gun goes off. If you make an error on timing it is better to finish the warm-up too close to the race than too long before hand. Think about this point regarding timing. For practice sessions I have observed that most athletes jog a little, stretch, go out for a short distance run and upon returning to the track they change into flats or spikes, do some accelerations and then jump into the meat of the workout. At the conclusion of the workout they change shoes again, go out for an easy distance run, and upon returning they stretch again to complete their workout. There is little time between any of the phases of the routine and most athletes would express that they felt ready to go when the workout began and they felt fairly good the next day. This is the way you should do it –on practice and race days. However, on race day I have observed many athletes abandon this type of routine for a different one, one with less total warm-up time and they often finish the process too long before the race begins. Why? It may be that they are trying to save energy for the race but any energy saved will be useless because the body is not prepared to use it. At recent High School and NCAA meets I saw exactly what I have discussed here. The first thing I noticed was people warming up way

too early. I watched several teams begin their warm-up run as early as 2 hours before the race. While there might be a good reason for this I could find none as I watched these teams. Almost to a team they returned to the start area within fifteen minutes and that was the last significant activity they did. There may have been stretching and some accelerations done (not in every case) but I am confident that these athletes were closer to a resting state than they were to being race ready when the gun went off. The other fault was that they probably did not warm-up long enough. Fifteen minutes is probably not enough but in this case their timing would have ruined even the best warm-up.

Following the race the next most important thing an athlete will do that day will be the cool down. It is the first and most crucial part of recovery from the race effort and a good thorough cool down will not only help get you ready for upcoming workouts but will help prevent injury. In practice your body learns to handle stress and develops the ability to recover through moderate exercise. You must use this ability to get ready for future workouts and races. It is important that each athlete cool down at a pace that is comfortable for them but it is also important that it not be too brief. A nice easy distance run of approximately the race distance is a reasonable rule of thumb and with some thorough stretching will help the athlete begin the recovery process and get ready for what lies ahead. Athletes who do a complete cool down always feel better the next day than when they do not do one. They are ready to go out and resume training for the next race. Too often I have observed athletes heading for the showers shortly after the race and I know they will not recover as well as the person who cools down properly.

In summary, don't waste endless hours of planning a training regimen by cutting corners on two crucial race day needs. Warm-up thoroughly and time it so that you are "warmed up" at race time and ready to go. When the race is over begin your recovery with a complete cool down and you will be preparing the body for the challenges ahead.