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Should sprinters run cross country?

The question comes up every summer, and it seems that every year I see plenty of misinformation and opinions flying around, but little evidence. I just responded to the question on MLive, but let me expand upon it here.

The best choice for sprinters and hurdlers might be a year-round speed/sprint program. However, most HS sprinters don't have access to that. In my experience, 98% of the high school speedsters who say, "I'm going to work out on my own," don't come anywhere near an ideal program. They would be much better off running cross country.

I'm not talking about high mileage , extreme cross country. But endurance work and hillwork can only help a sprinter develop more leg strength and more endurance. That endurance gives a sprinter more capacity for greater speed workouts in the spring. It also opens more doors. What coach wouldn't want their 100 star to also be able to run an amazing mile relay leg? They might even find out that they're better at the 800 or the 300H because of this strength.

There are plenty of world-class examples of sprinters and hurdlers who used some cross country style training in the off-season to build endurance. Uganda's John Aki-Bua ran in the World XC Champs the same year he won the gold in the 400H with a world record.

An old friend of mine is Harald Schmid. Before your time, so you might not know his name, but check out his PRs: 20.68, 44.92, 1:44.83, and a European record 47.48 for the 400 hurdles. Five European golds and two Olympic medals.

A couple years ago, I asked him about sprinter/hurdlers running XC , and here's his response: "Here's one advice for the young runner: First of all it is very good to do cross country running in the fall. And speed will not disappear. 400m hurdles is a sprint event which lasts longer. So make her keep her speed exercises and let her get a good basic endurance in the fall."

Incidentally, the young girl in question chose not to do XC as a junior. The next spring she ran 47.04 and placed 12th at D1. As a senior she ran XC, and improved to 45.23 for 7th in D1. (Our best 200/400 runner, I should add, is also a cross country veteran.)

More than a few times I have heard people say that athletes lose their speed and spring with distance training. Please show me the evidence. I have only been able to find one study, and it indicated that ***ultra-marathon*** training might have such an effect. We're not talking about ultra-marathon running here...

More endurance strength means greater capacity for hard speed workouts. And for the vast majority of high school sprinters and hurdlers who are not involved with another sport, running cross country is the best choice.

POSTED BY JEFF HOLLOBAUGH