Running Training 101: Six Keys to Becoming a Better (High School) Runner

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*Editor’s Note: Weldon Johnson, aka “Wejo,” is a co-founder of LetsRun.com. After founding this website in 2000, he went from 29:49 at 10k to 28:06 in 2003 and finished 4th at the USATF 10,000m twice. He ran 4:29 for 1600 and 9:35 for 3200 in high school.*

Over a decade ago, I wrote a training article titled [“Why I Sucked in College.”](https://www.letsrun.com/news/2006/09/wejo-speaks-why-i-sucked-in-college/) It’s the most popular training article on the site and I’ve had countless runners (some who didn’t run in college) tell me they gained a lot from it.

With Labor Day and a new school year almost here for everyone, it’s time for me to write another training article.

This article came about because I helped coach a high schooler last summer. Once the school year began, I didn’t want to send her workouts (she has her own school coach), but I still wanted to help her. So I tried to think of some wisdom I could share from my years in the sport.

I figured there could be nothing better than understanding the basics of the sport. I believe running fast is an acquired and learned skill. We can’t all be Olympic champions, but I guarantee we can all do amazing things that once seemed almost inconceivable for our bodies.

This article is geared to the high school runner just because I was thinking of what advice I’d give a high schooler with a coach, but really applies to anyone in the sport of running that I’m not coaching. Sort of a Running 101.

I’m sure some of you will think the advice below is way too basic, but it’s super important to remember the big-picture view of what you’re doing.

Here we go. The basics of being good at running.

**1. Running is a year-round sport**

**If you think you’re going to be a great runner by running only part of the year, think again. Long distance running is first and foremost an aerobic sport. The old adage is cross country is a summer sport played out in the fall.**

That’s because the training you do in the summer determines a lot of your success in the fall. Some runners may get by better than others on limited training, but *every* runner can improve by improving their base. The better your base, the better you’ll be.

I’m actually all for kids playing other sports, but once you are in high school and want to be great at running, you need to be maintaining and improving your aerobic base. That can’t occur if you’re only running one season of the year. Want to play soccer? Go ahead. But if you want to be better at running, you’d better be waking up and getting in a run every morning before school as well.

What you do over the summer pushes the boundaries of — or puts a limit on, depending on how you want to look at it — what you can do in the fall. And what you do in the fall pushes the boundary on what you can do the following spring. Etc., etc.

Sure, runners need down time, but the most basic thing I didn’t understand until my senior year of high school was that, in order to be my best, I had to train year-round. I was a very serious student, I had a great coach, and I thought I took running really seriously. Yet somehow, it took me until my senior year to comprehend that I needed to be doing it year-round to have a chance of success.

**2.  Listen to your body**

You are trying to teach your body to run as fast and far as possible. You’re not trying to get your body to do something it can’t do. You’re trying to expand what it is capable of doing and then come as close as possible to achieving that on race day.

**Always remember that your long-term objective is to run faster. You don’t do that by running slow all the time or running as hard as you can all the time. You do that by training smart and teaching your body to be as relaxed as possible while running fast.**

People often train off of watches, GPS, and heart rate monitors, but all of those things are proxies for understanding the signals your body is sending you. Don’t forget that. You’re not trying to force your body to do something it can’t do. You’re just trying to get it to do the maximum it *can* do.

**3. Stay healthy**

The top runners in the world run a lot. They also are consistently battling injuries. Looking back, I’d say most people, once they are super dedicated, err too much on the side of doing too much. **It’s much better to train 10 months consistently at 98% than to push it to 100%, get injured, and miss two months in the middle.**

**(Having said that, there are a lot of runners who pretend to be dedicated but really aren’t. Once you can look yourself in the mirror and know you are super dedicated, then you realize sometimes less can be more).**

If you’re getting injured a lot, you need to figure out why. A lot of younger runners have terrible form and have not acquired some of the efficiency and functional strength that helps people stay healthy. But a lot of older runners who are super-efficient still get injured a lot. I’ve joked that running is really how much you can train without getting injured, but that’s not accurate. **You’re not trying to train the most you can, but rather the smartest way you can**. I’m trying to not get into too many specifics, but here are [some good warm-up drills](https://coachjayjohnson.com/necessary-warm-up-for-runners/) from coach **Jay Johnson**.

**4. Relaxation is the key to running fast**

**There are no bonus points for trying harder in running. It actually hurts you more than it helps you.**

**I used to think I just needed to try harder and push myself more to run faster. I used to think I needed to run faster on my recovery days to be a better runner. That was not the case. I needed to get in better shape and learn how to get the most out of my body on race day.** You don’t do that by trying “harder.” When I won races at any point in my career, I don’t think I tried any harder than when I didn’t. Sure, there are a few races [I’m particularly proud of](https://www.usatf.org/events/2003/usaoutdoortfchampionships/results/F27.asp) where I dug deep, but generally when I won a race it meant I was really fit and got the most of out of my ability that day.

Just watch the video below. It shows **Jakob Ingebrigtsen** going from last to first and winning the 2018 European 1500-meter title. Watch it over and over. At any point, does Jakob look like he is trying harder than anyone else in the race? No.

And when he did this, he was 17 years old.

If anything, he looks like he’s trying less because a) he is so fit and b) he is not wasting any energy getting tight by trying “harder.” The kid was born to run, has trained his ass off, and has taught his body to be very relaxed at high speeds. If you’re struggling in a workout or race, don’t tell yourself to try harder; think about trying to relax and be as efficient as possible so you can get the most of your ability at that moment. As the great **Arthur Lydiard** said, [“Relaxation is the key to good running.”](http://lynbrooksports.prepcaltrack.com/ATHLETICS/TRACK/lydiard.pdf)

**5. Your overall goal is to run as fast as you can, but your daily goal usually isn’t**

**Never forget what your overall goal is: to run as fast as possible from Point A to Point B in a race. Sometimes, you may be putting in a ton of relaxed/easy/”slow” miles to do this, but never forget your overall goal. You’re not putting in a bunch of miles just to show how tough you are, or to hit a nice round number, but to get from the start of a race to the finish as fast as possible.**

**Having said that, rarely in workouts are you trying to run as fast as you can. Each workout has a purpose, and most of the time in a workout, you’re not trying to run as hard as you can; you’re trying to hit a certain training zone to teach your body to adjust to running faster paces while staying relaxed. The goal is to run as fast as you can in the race, not the workout.**

**Know your daily purpose. I almost made this its own point. Everything you do has a purpose and a goal. If your easy day is primary for recovery, remember that. Pushing too hard on an easy day and being ragged the next day in your workout is not a good day. Pushing too hard in your workout and being ragged or injured in your race is not a good day either. Taking a day off physically and mentally can be a great day.**

**There are times you go to the well in practice. Know when those are.**

**It is much better to be under your threshold than over it.**

I was known for running really “slow” on my easy days, but I wasn’t trying to run slow. I was running a pace that felt comfortable for recovery. While others may have felt it was slow, I never did. That said, although I was known for running “slow,” even in a base phase you should be staying in touch with your speed by doing something faster — strides, at least — a few days a week.

**6. Finish faster than you start**

A simple rule of thumb is that you should be running faster at the end of nearly every run or workout than you began. If you’re on an “easy” run and you’re slowing down at the end, that means you went out too fast and it wasn’t easy. If you’re doing 10 intervals and are slowing down at the end, you went out too fast and aren’t going to get the same physiological benefits as if you started slower. I’ve never discussed this with a physiologist, but I’m nearly certain if you did six intervals of the same distance in 70-68-66-64-62-60, you’d get a much better workout than if you did 60-62-64-66-68-70. Why? In the first case, your body is much more relaxed and you are helping it learn how to run faster while having something in reserve.

You need to get to the point where you can go for a 30-minute tempo run and, without looking at a watch, run faster at the end than the beginning.

If you focus on staying relaxed, finishing faster than you started, and learning to read the signals your body is giving you, I guarantee you’ll become a better runner.

The points above are the building blocks to being a successful runner.Once you understand them, running and running faster can become a part of who you are.

I’m starting a thread on this article and want to know what you think of it: [Running 101: 6 Keys to Becoming a Better (High School) Runner.](https://www.letsrun.com/forum/flat_read.php?thread=9571535) Also, I want to know what info we could provide high schoolers that would help them become better runners.  Feel free to post on the thread or email me directly at [wejo@letsrun.com](mailto:wejo@letsrun.com).