

Cross Country Training

Using a Conservative-Start Approach

Jack Daniels, PhD – “Daniels’ RUNNING Formula”

A major way that most cross country races vary from track races is how fast the field goes out at the start. It is very common, especially in high school cross country races, that the fastest few runners all go out too fast. They often end up slowing down a fair amount because of their too-fast start, but they still win because everyone else also went out too fast to stay with the pack. So, the winner went out too fast but still wins and therefore decides that going out fast is the best way to win a race. When one of the runners who is pretty good goes out at a more reasonable pace, that runner will beat the better runners who go out too fast.

I have always encouraged a more moderate beginning pace, and I saw the benefits of this approach one year at our national championship meet. I measured off the first 400 meters of the course, and the last thing I asked my women’s team to do in preparation for the race was to run a solid 800 meters, going through that first 400 in 85 seconds, which would be about a 17:42 5K if held the whole way. I encouraged them to not go any faster when the race began, which was to be about 8 to 10 minutes after completing that solid 800 warm-up run.

When the race started, my seven runners all went through that first 400 between 84 and 87 and were the last seven runners in the field of more than 180 runners. Some of the front runners went out in under 75, and all others were between 75 and 82 at that first 400 mark. At the first 1-mile mark, one of my runners was leading the entire pack, and she went on to win by more than 20 seconds (with a time of about 17:20). My next few runners placed 5th, 8th, 15th, and 26th, and winning the team title was a cinch.

Following are a few things to keep in mind when using this conservative-start approach:

- Often, especially in high school races, the course narrows very early in the race, and this can make it tough to move past the fast-start leaders. You get squeezed back and often lose confidence that you can still catch up. However, there is usually plenty of time to make a move during the middle mile of the race, even after getting boxed out early, and battling the field to get a front spot early can take a lot of reserve energy that could better serve you later on.
- It is common for relatively young runners who try the slow-start approach to become mentally discouraged when they see a mass of others out in front of them just a couple of minutes into the race. However, if the coach holds practice sessions that involve a conservative start to practice this tactic in some early-season races, these young runners will quickly realize the benefits of such an approach. The day they are more cautious but still confident they will catch up with many of the too-fast starters, there will be a lot of happy runners on the team.
- A tactic that works well is to pass as many runners as possible (even to the extent of counting each runner passed) during the middle mile of the race. I am not particularly impressed with runners who, in the middle of the pack, outkick two or three others in the

final 100 meters of a race, because this often means they were not working very hard in the middle of the race. According to my math, passing 20 others during the middle of the race and getting outkicked by 3 runners in the final sprint means you helped your team score by 17 points, whereas not passing any in the middle mile and outkicking 3 at the end means you gained 3 points for your team. Which approach produces the better team score is not hard to realize.

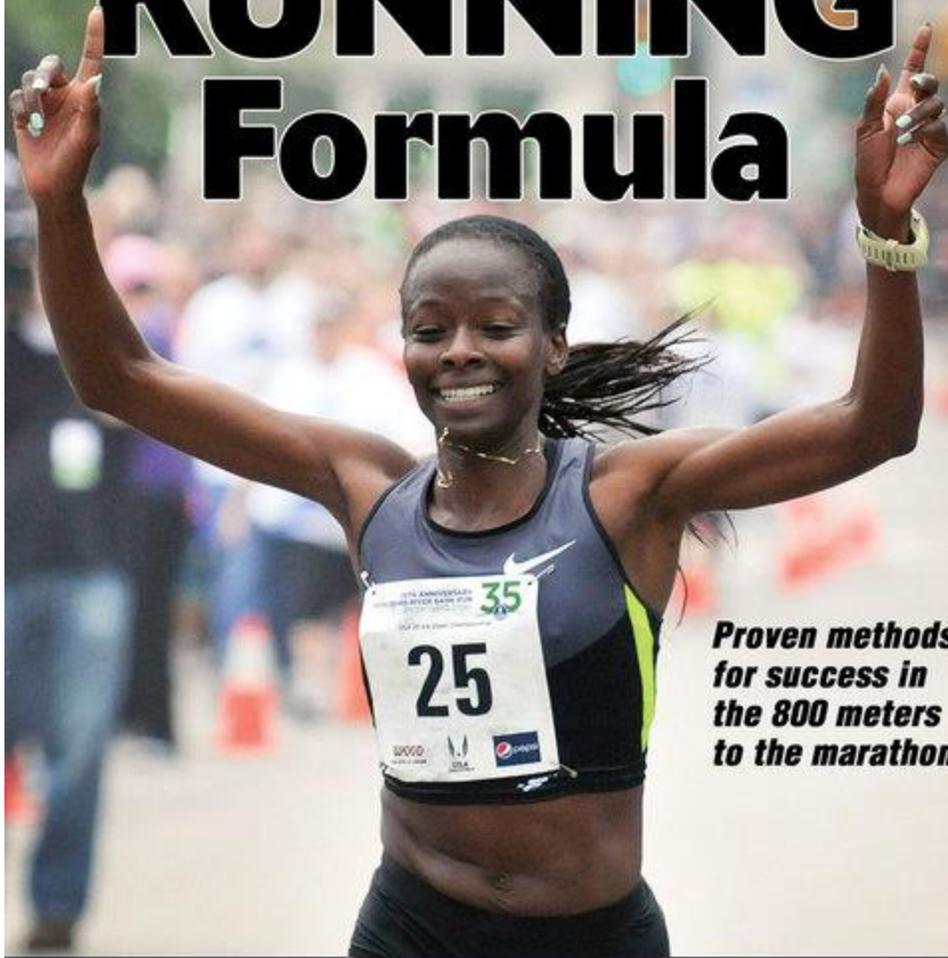
Remember, if you are running with a good number of runners in the middle of a cross country race and you aren't feeling particularly strong, you must realize all those others near you are also feeling as bad as you are or they wouldn't be with you—they would be running on by and leaving you behind.

An additional comment relative to going out fast in cross country races relates to how the initial pace seems to keep getting faster and faster the more important the race is. In other words, a conference race may go out too fast, but a regional championship goes out even faster, and the state or national championship goes out faster again, even if the competition involves the same group of runners you just faced last week. To me this says that controlling your pace at the start becomes more and more important as you progress into the championship portion of the season.

Third Edition

Daniels' RUNNING Formula

Over
140,000
copies sold!



*Proven methods
for success in
the 800 meters
to the marathon*

Jack Daniels, PhD

*"The world's best running coach"
—*Runner's World**