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Why do we coach? This is a question I ask myself on a yearly, monthly, weekly, and sometimes even daily basis. There are times when I feel confident in my abilities, and there are times that I feel like a complete failure. Failure is ok, not learning or growing from failure is unacceptable. Following a dismal season last year, I committed to learn from my experience.

At our district championship last season, our girls' 4×1 was DQ'd. Our boys' 4×1 was also DQ'd. Our male jumpers, who just the week before PR'd with jumps over 20 feet, didn't get a mark over 17-6. Both our 4×2 relays placed outside the two and therefore did not qualify to the next round. Our best female jumper set a personal best, but still didn't qualify for the next round.

We qualified the fewest number of individuals to the next round since I began coaching track and field at Captain John L. Chapin High School in 2010. I'm responsible for writing the daily workouts for our short and long sprinters, relays, and horizontal jumpers. I felt incompetent and, at that moment, reacted like one too. After reflecting on the disastrous results, I knew I had to make changes to our training program and overall methods.

The traveling I did this summer was documented in a previous article. After returning, I felt like I still had more to do. I reached out daily to coaches of high school, collegiate, and professional athletes and all of them helped me. Coach Tony Holler from Plainfield North High School, Christopher Glaeser of Freelap USA, Coach Gabe Sanders at Stanford, Coach Ron Grigg from Jacksonville University, Coach Rueben Jones from

Columbia University, Coach Anthony Veney of Ventura Community College, Coach Kenta Bell, former Olympic triple jumper, and Cody Billow of Athletex, a former intern at ALTIS.

All highly successful coaches with individual philosophies that helped me rethink my coaching abilities in a worthwhile manner. And, out of sheer desperation, I emailed Latif Thomas, owner and founder of Complete Track and Field, to see if he was willing to serve as a mentor.

I have been purchasing Latif's programs since 2011 when I started writing the workouts for our program, and I've transformed how we coach our athletes. The majority of his programs are designed for high school athletes, and I consider him a great asset. It's one thing to communicate with a mentor by email or direct message, but it's another to communicate weekly by phone and be able to ask very detailed questions about specific athletes, progressions, and any topic an obsessive coach like myself can think of. Latif receives hundreds of inquiries daily, and I felt as if I won the mentorship lottery when he agreed to mentor me for the entire season.

This article is about more than the gains, marks, and personal bests we set this season. This article is about how mentoring a coach can change someone's outlook on an entire profession. How we need to start sharing what we know as coaches for the benefit of our athletes and sport. And how we need to stop trying to hide our training secrets because of our oversized egos or any other detrimental reasons.

These are my top 10 "Latifisms" based on what I learned from Coach Thomas.

1. **Coach the Athlete, Not Your Opinion**

Our job is to make sure an athlete performs to the best of their ability, and more importantly, maintain a safe environment in which they remain mentally and physically

healthy. We take great pride in knowing why we do a specific warm up, drill, workout, and stretch. We encourage kids to ask *why* about everything we do during practice. If we can't give them a response that makes sense to them, they aren't obligated to perform that activity or exercise. We want our athletes to become students of their events and to be curious about everything related to the sport.

This type of relationship builds trust and develops an athlete's confidence. With so much information readily available in this digital age, it's easy for an athlete to discover whether what is being asked of them in practice repeatedly is total nonsense or legit. This season, we had several kids ask why we warm up differently on certain days, why we only do voluntary yoga on Wednesday and not a full practice, and why we haven't practiced blocks two days before the first meet. And many other questions only teenagers ask. And you know how many athletes skipped an exercise, practice, weight room session, etc. because we couldn't answer their questions? None. Yes, we are encouraging kids to question adults and in doing so, they make us better coaches while they become better student-athletes.

This lesson extends to several outdated coaching methods. We are entitled to coach as we see fit, but don't coach in a specific manner because that's the way it's always been done. I don't mean that stuff considered old school doesn't work anymore. I only mean that if you're too hard headed about your opinion and research is punching you in the face telling you otherwise, do something about it.

Before this season, I believed Wednesdays were recovery days. Recovery included core work, general strength, and hurdle mobility. This year, we changed Wednesday to voluntary yoga day. Or sometimes we gave them an entire day off. Was it weird? Yes. Was it uncomfortable? Absolutely. But who am I to argue with science over the importance of rest, recovery, and time away from the track. This gave our athletes time to

socialize, attend tutoring, and live the lives of high school students.

Last year, if someone disagreed with me about the importance of Wednesday practice, I would have said they had no clue what they were talking about. Then I stopped coaching my opinion and started coaching the athletes.

2. **Progress the Athlete Based on Skill, Not Time of Year**

At the state qualifying meet, I witnessed a female hurdler from a competing school win the 100 hurdle finals without using blocks. I commend her coach. Our top female jumper set her personal best of 37’7” this year with a 13-step approach. She never performed bounding at practice because she can’t land heel to toe during bounding. This year, she performed skips for height, skips for distance, hurdle gallops, 6-step short approaches, and a lot of speed work on the runway. She had 2 jumps over 37 feet and several 36-feet jumps, by far her most consistent year. Why? Because we only progressed based on skill.

Blocks can give an athlete an advantage if used correctly. But the majority of high school sprinters shouldn’t use blocks. If used properly, a sprinter can hit 50% of their full speed after two steps and 80% after 8 steps. But most kids pop straight up, spin their wheels, take cute tiny baby steps with no violence, bend at the waist, or do other indescribable actions out of blocks.

At the high school level, we have to work bad habits out of dozens of athletes. These include bad posture and foot strike. Yet everyone wants to use blocks, fancy bounding drills, eye-popping hurdle drills, and other elaborate social media finds. Again, these serve no purpose if done incorrectly. Whatever the skill, let athletes feel the position, watch themselves on video, receive feedback, and work toward improving skills before progressing.

3. **Give 2, Take 2**

In a recent Freelap article written by Nick Newman, "The Horizontal Jumps: Technical Training for the Long Jump," he mentioned, "Fouling is a psychological choice," referring to jumpers who constantly foul, even by an inch, at every level. The same can be said of relay handoffs. The "give 2, take 2 approach" is a way to develop handoffs with your relays, specifically the 4×100 relay. With this method, the incoming runner (1st/3rd leg) will only give 2 handoffs during practice, and the outgoing runner will only receive 2. (We practice 3rd to 4th exchange on a different day.) If both fail, so be it. We only get one chance at a meet.

The psychological training is extremely effective because it forces athletes to focus from the very beginning. They don't have any reps to waste. Generally, we practice sprint relays handoffs twice a week, and each athlete knows they must get the job done within the allotted reps. Athletes will beg, plead, and argue for an extra rep. Don't give it to them. Halfway through the season, we changed our 1st leg to our anchor, and we handed the baton outside the zone 2x this season in competition during the final exchange. We failed. But at practice, we never changed our philosophy. Our anchor was often frustrated that we wouldn't practice until we achieved the perfect handoff. Now, if they (3rd to 4th leg) get the exchange on the first try, there's no need for a 2nd rep.

By season's end, our female team ran their best times of the season, including a state qualifying time of 48.25. Were the handoffs perfect? No. But psychologically, our girls understood they had only one chance at the meet because in practice they got it right or they didn't. These are the same four girls who dropped the baton at district last year. This year they earned our school's first regional sprint relay title.

Our boy's sprint relay squad earned a 2nd place at district, finishing with a season best time of 42.55. They also mishandled several handoffs during the season, but by focusing during practice, they became focused during competition and important meets. They improved their time by an entire second at the championship meet.

One final note about the "give 2, take 2" approach. We don't perform any reps at 50% or 75% because that never occurs during a meet and because perceived efforts among athletes differ. What one athlete thinks is 50% may be faster or slower to another athlete. I would much rather work on stationary hand placement drills that transfer much more effectively to the race.

4. **Peaking Starts on Day 1**

At our first day of practice this year, a mass of kids pushed and drove themselves up a steep hill, placed themselves against a fence to feel specific body positions, and pushed sleds down a football field. We resembled a summer football training program. We were trying to develop acceleration mechanics.

In the middle of the season, some of our kids were using resistance belts to continue to feel acceleration mechanics. During our final meets, coaches filmed our remaining athletes accelerating out of blocks or during handoffs. Our practices have not changed much regarding volume and intensity during our push (acceleration) day.

I don't know the magic workouts for peaking. We don't have a fail-proof formula for peaking our athletes toward the end of the season. I don't think either exists, and I've asked everyone including Latif. If someone knew the secret formula or workout programs for peaking, they'd be super rich by now, even in track and field.

Yet 95% of our athletes ran their fastest times this season

when it mattered most, during championship season. We followed the basic principles of championship phase workouts: kept the intensity high, lowered the density, and continued with recovery as needed. For us, however, championship season starts on the first day of practice. What does this mean?

We don’t wait until the end of the season to address speed, posture, form, health, and everything related to performing. Whatever training philosophy you believe in—short to long, long to short, a mixture of both, plyos or no plyos, lifting only during the off-season or lifting all the way through the end of the season—I learned that peaking is a process. If we believe and trust the process, the end result will take care of itself.

Plan backward from your last meet toward your first meet, write down which energy systems and skills your athletes should work on during specific times of the season, and remain flexible. Latif helped me write workouts one week at a time, sometimes on the first practice day of the week. Does that make me lazy or unprepared? Of course not.

We must remain flexible, taking into account two-day meets, how athletes feel, travel, high school social lives, and unexpected circumstances. We all want the golden ticket, the perfect set of circumstances for peaking, but that doesn’t exist in track and field. The coach and the athlete must develop a process, follow it, and trust it.

5. **Sprinting Resembles a Gymnastics Routine**

Just like a gymnastics routine, sprinting has a certain tempo, rhythm, cadence, and timing. When a sprinter has a great race in the 100, 200, or 400, it’s truly a thing of beauty. Athletes need to feel the positions of sprinting and then express those movements during sprint performances. Acceleration should be violent and aggressive, but it also requires patience, timing, and synchronization. Coach Sanders

describes it as a blend of aggression and extension. The beginning of every sprint event requires an effective and explosive acceleration pattern. Gymnasts wouldn't dare skip the beginning of a rehearsed routine, and track sprinters should know how the beginning of each sprinting event should feel.

At the high school level, our coaching staff doesn't talk about a transition phase, max velocity phase, holding speed endurance, or a decelerating at the end of a race. Each aspect of the race is addressed in training. Max velocity is addressed through fly runs, wickets, and sprint-float-sprint sessions. We focus on speed endurance by sprinting at high intensities between 15 to 30-second efforts. And we race model at practice, from the first week to the end of the season. Like gymnasts, we prepare for each aspect of a specific sprinting event. Sprinters need to become aware and feel each aspect of their event, train it, feel it, and perform it, just like a gymnast.

6. **Don't Chase Speed, Let Speed Come to You**

This was the first season we used the Freelap timing system to help develop our sprinters. We timed accelerations and fly runs and ensured our sprinters maintained effective mechanics. High school boys, especially, love using Freelap because of the competition and the instant feedback. However, we kept having to repeat phrases like "You don't get any medals for winning the first 10-30 meters" and "Try easy."

The irony of using a timing system is that times are generally slower at the beginning because athletes strain so hard to run fast times that they unintentionally and haphazardly develop terrible mechanics.

Speed, like many aspects of life, is something we don't want to chase. Let it come. At the high school level, we often use the relationship analogy. The harder you chase someone you

like, the faster they will date someone else. Specifically not you; someone drastically different than you. That is the PG-13 version, of course.

Another analogy we use is the harder you chase popularity and other peoples' approval, the faster your real self will slip away. Granted these aren't Thoreau style quotes that will blow you away. But for high school athletes, the quotes put into perspective the concepts of patience with acceleration, floating, and relaxing at the finish. We must be able to speak our athletes' language and help them understand how speed comes together during a race.

7. **Don't Marry Your Workouts to Volume**

A recent conversation with a collaborating coach began with the question, "How much volume did 'x athlete' perform this week?" My response, as respectfully as possible: "We don't care about volume." This coach went into a three-minute explanation of why volume was so important, specifically in the 400-meter sprint. I honestly remember zero about his defense, not because I wasn't listening, but because it was the same philosophy I've heard during clinics and presentations. His words, not mine: "If you want to be great, you have to be willing to run what the great ones run as professionals and in college. And they run a lot." I just don't see it.

Our long sprinters know the hardest workout they'll face will be 5×200 with a 5-minute recovery at race pace or 4×300 with a 4-minute recovery also at race pace. We never deviated from this plan. Once we started running in track meets, we let the races take care of specific performance in all sprinting events. Our long sprinters did between 1,000 to 1,200 meters of specific work on a given day. That's it. They didn't have to hit *x* amount of meters before they were declared fit enough to continue to the next phase of training. They didn't run *x* amount of meters just because "the great ones" do it.

Follow the math. Our male 4×4 had three sprinters consistently record sub 50 splits. We broke the previous school record and ran a season best of 3:20.28. Unfortunately in Texas, qualifying can be unpleasant. We placed 3rd in our own district after running 3:23.1 and were unable to advance. We live in a cruel world. The irony is, we were beaten by two teams that wholeheartedly believe in voluminous training. It was a bittersweet conclusion for our 4×4. Would I change anything about the small amount of volume our long sprinters ran? Absolutely not. Our opponents were the better teams on that day. And I know we achieved a lot without an enormous concern paid to volume.

Divorce yourself from volume requisites. Free yourself from unnecessary worry. Liberate yourself with the knowledge that sprinters can run fast times based, not on volume, but on specific event work during a season.

8. **Speed Creates Endurance, Endurance Does Not Create Speed**

We go fast on day one and, as our season concludes, we're still training fast. We do want our athletes to have a base, but it's a base of power and speed. All our sprinters, from 100 to 400 meters, trained fast the entire season. The only long endurance day was actually a recovery day and, even then, we used many general strength circuits to get away from endurance runs.

What kind of endurance does a 100-meter sprinter need when they sprint from 10 to 14 seconds? What kind of endurance does a 200-meter sprinter need when they are on the track from 22 to 30 seconds? They need short speed endurance and speed endurance.

What kind of endurance does a 400-meter sprinter need? The smartest coaches describe the 400 meters as a race where speed is extremely important. Kebba Tolbert, Associate Head Coach at Harvard, surmised the event like this: "The 400 is a race of

controlled deceleration, where speed and strategy are of vital, yet often neglected, importance.” Vince Anderson of Texas A&M said, “The 400 is a sprint…the longest submaximal sprint contested in global track and field.” Is endurance needed in the 400-meter sprint? Absolutely. It’s a very specific endurance that can be developed with speed and not slow, agonizing, painful, pointless runs.

Our program is not short to long. Nor is it long to short. Our program is based on developing skills and improving athletes’ strengths. Unfortunately, endurance and volume-based programs often work because the program has phenomenal athletes. A phenom athlete at the high school level can hide many glaring weaknesses during an entire program. I have witnessed this year after year. I’ve been a part of it.

Asking your athletes to go out for aimless timed runs, repeating 500s, 600s, 700s, and 800s is abuse. Using the phrase *recovery day* to describe a speed session is absurd. And it’s too easy to coach this way. The goal of every sprinter, including long sprinters, should be to develop speed, proper sprinting mechanics, specific endurance, and an overall understanding of the race.

9. **Little Things Add up to Big Things**

This takes patience. This aspect of coaching is hard. This is where communication is key. This is where feedback and expectations matter. The ability to identify an area where an athlete will benefit the most is difficult. For example, working on feeling and expressing explosive positions during acceleration can take an entire season. It’s easy to put kids in blocks and let them do an endless amount of starts. Identifying the little things during acceleration, specifically during the first two steps, takes analysis, appropriate feedback, strength training, individualization, and patience.

Our best 100-meter male sprinter finally broke through the 11-second barrier in his final meet by going 10.95. A member our girl's 4×1 meter relay broke through the 13-second barrier by sprinting 12.8 in her final open race. This resulted from filming and breaking down their sessions, cueing and communicating in a way that made sense to them, and performing appropriate strength and supplemental exercises that contributed directly to their success. Together, these little things added up to big things and eventually brought season and personal bests.

From the way athletes warm up to the way they cool down and everything in between, it's vital they understand that the little things play a significant role in their overall success.

10. **Kids Love Fair and Authentic**

As a coach, my biggest struggle is to work athletes hard and still allow them to have fun. I've strived to develop meaningful and deep relationships with many of my athletes. I firmly believe in out-working other coaches by reading more, attending more clinics, questioning mentors, and reviewing what has worked and what hasn't. We expect athletes in our program to attend practice, work hard, recover, eat right, and be positive. These expectations are realistic. As coaches, we should talk to an athlete about life, smile, laugh, tell stories, and be genuine.

In my second year coaching, I essentially forced by best 100-meter hurdle female athlete to run the 300 hurdles. I promised her that, if she didn't try her best during the race at an unimportant meet, I was going to take away the 100-meter hurdles or kick her off the team. She essentially sprinted for 150 meters and then jogged her way into the finish. I was an unrealistic and terrible coach.

Throughout the years, I've argued with athletes in front of

their teammates. I've suspended and kicked athletes off the team because I didn't consider them coachable or they didn't listen to my explicit coaching instructions. It happened this season, more than once, but then I changed.

We must communicate with athletes. We must let them know our expectations. We must constantly remind ourselves we are coaching 14- to 18-year-olds. And we must treat them how we want to be treated. Recently, Coach Sanders stated, "Walking to practice should never feel like walking to death row." It sounds severe, but I used to make athletes feel this way.

Latif reminded me, "You must find what is important to people and use that to motivate them." Every athlete has a trigger point, a story, a background, a circumstance. These are not excuses, they are real situations. I can't yell at everyone. Not every athlete cares about school records, qualifying for state, winning district, and earning a bunch of medals.

Teenagers have a great BS detector, and they can smell a fraud. Being fair and authentic requires a coach to be a good listener, patient, nurturing, understanding, honest, and most importantly, genuine.

This is, by far, the most important aspect of coaching I learned this year.

Please share so others may benefit.