

Hurdles: Introduction for Beginners

There's a reason that the hurdles are considered running events, rather than jumping events. Reduced to simple terms, the ideal hurdler will basically run the 100 to 400 meters, while taking what amounts to a long, gliding stride over each hurdle. The competitors will spend as little time in the air as possible. They'll get their feet back on the ground quickly after clearing each hurdle, then will continue running with consistent strides so they can clear the next obstacle just as smoothly as the last. As some coaches like to say, a hurdler event is a sprint race with a few small barriers along the way.



At the youth level, however, it's a bit different. The beginning hurdler is going to run up to the hurdle, slow down, jump over the hurdle, then start running again. It almost doesn't matter how small you make the barriers in practice.

Anything reasonably close to the size of an actual hurdle is going to elicit the run-jump-run reaction

Therefore, patience on the coaches' part is just as important as skill development on the competitors' part when teaching the sport to new hurdles.

Safety and Comfort

As with any running event, a good stretching routine is a must. Even young, active, flexible runners will benefit from a good warm-up.

The next step is getting the runners comfortable with clearing hurdles, and beginning to teach them to avoid the run-jump-run instinct, which can only be accomplished through repetition. While the youngsters are learning, they'll need some barriers to clear. Youth events, depending on the competitors' ages, generally begin with 30-inch hurdles, so beginners should start with lower barriers. Additionally, the barriers must be light and safe, so the kids won't be injured when striking a hurdle. Options include adjustable power hurdles, which can generally be set from 6 to 42 inches high. These devices are lightweight and collapse easily when struck. Another good choice is the banana step. These training hurdles are made from lightweight plastic, colored yellow or light green – hence the “banana” in the name – and generally come in heights of 6 to 24 inches.



Technique

Among the teaching points for beginning hurdlers, the start will be the easiest. At higher levels, of course, races can be won or lost out of the blocks. But there's plenty of time to work on starting technique. Novices must focus on selecting a lead hurdling leg (usually the left for right-handers), then develop a consistent stride pattern, because the stride pattern determines which leg is placed in the back of the starting blocks. If the hurdler takes an even number of steps to the first hurdle, the lead leg goes in the back block, and vice-versa for an odd number of steps.



Next, nothing beats repetition when you're teaching hurdle clearance. But a little visualization never hurts. Have your prospective hurdlers walk up to a youth-sized hurdle. For those who are leading with their left leg, have them walk to the

right of the hurdle, lift their lead leg and stretch it out, to demonstrate that their leg can rise above the hurdle. Repeat the drill on the other side of the hurdle, but have them lift their rear leg up in proper position off to the side, with the knee as high as possible, to show that the trail leg can also pass above the hurdle without a jump. Yes, they'll still jump the first few times, but as their comfort increases, the visualization will remain in their mind and help them progress.



Start the novices out clearing just one practice barrier, but make sure they sprint to a finish line after clearing it, to get used to the rhythm of a hurdles race. Many races, after all, are won between the final hurdle and the tape. Next, add the second hurdle, so the competitors can begin developing a stride pattern between hurdles. Again, repetition is the best teacher. As the athlete's progress, gradually increase the height of the practice barriers, and increase their number. At

some levels, youth hurdlers will face eight barriers, moving up to a maximum of 10.

Conclusion

Don't worry about the fine points at the beginning. Just get the hurdlers comfortable clearing the barriers without jumping, while developing a reasonably consistent stride pattern. As they improve, begin to emphasize proper clearance techniques, with the lead leg snapping up, the upper body leaning forward, and the trail leg rising up and to the side, with the knee higher than the foot.

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