

Middle School Cross Country Training Plan

Twelve weeks, day by day. Volume is in minutes, not miles. Roughly ninety percent of the running is at Chat pace. One hard effort per week, and on a meet week the race is it. Sundays off, every week.

Coach Jason Saltmarsh

USATF Level 2 Endurance Coach
25 years coaching · 31 state champions
**2018 New Hampshire Cross Country
Coach of the Year**

Free to share. Print it, post it on the wall, email it to another coach, put it in your league's coaching packet. Leave the footer on so they can find the other two levels.

WK	MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY	FRIDAY	SATURDAY	WEEK TOTAL
1	32 min Long run (Chat)	25 min Chat + 4 strides Durability A	26 min Game: The Quiet Mile	22 min Chat + 4 strides Durability B	10 min Chat + 4 strides	Optional adventure run	115 min ~12 mi
2	36 min Long run (Chat)	27 min Chat + 4 strides Durability B	28 min Game: Caterpillar surge every 40 sec	25 min Chat + 4 strides Durability A	12 min Chat + 4 strides	Optional adventure run	128 min ~13.5 mi
3	40 min Long run (Chat)	30 min Chat + 6 strides Durability A	32 min Game: Traffic Light 4 x 3 min Steady	28 min Chat + hills 6 x 8 sec Durability B	12 min Chat + 4 strides	Optional adventure run	142 min ~15 mi
4 ↓	32 min Long run (Chat)	25 min Chat + 4 strides Durability B	25 min Game: Sharks & Minnows + Chat run	23 min Chat + 4 strides Durability A	10 min Chat + 4 strides	Optional adventure run	115 min ~12 mi
5	45 min Long run (Chat)	18 min Pre-meet: Chat + 4 strides + drills	38 min MEET 1 (3K) WU + race + CD	28 min Chat recovery Durability A	21 min Chat + hills 6 x 8 sec Durability B	Optional adventure run	150 min ~16 mi
6	48 min Long run (Chat)	18 min Pre-meet: Chat + 4 strides + drills	40 min MEET 2 (3K) WU + race + CD	30 min Chat recovery Durability B	24 min Game: Coin Flip Hills Durability A	Optional adventure run	160 min ~17 mi
7	50 min Long run (Chat)	18 min Pre-meet: Chat + 4 strides + drills	40 min MEET 3 (3K) WU + race + CD	35 min Chat recovery Durability A	29 min Game: Beat the Coach 1.5 mi · Durability B	Optional adventure run	172 min ~18 mi
8 ↓	40 min Long run (Chat)	25 min Chat + 4 strides Durability B	30 min Game: Predator & Prey 9 min · handicap start	25 min Chat recovery Durability A	15 min Chat + 4 strides	Optional adventure run	135 min ~14 mi
9	50 min Long run (Chat)	18 min Pre-meet: Chat + 4 strides + drills	42 min MEET 4 (3K) WU + race + CD	36 min Chat recovery Durability B	34 min Game: Traffic Light 4 x 2 min Strong · Dur. A	Optional adventure run	180 min ~19 mi
10	50 min Long run (Chat)	20 min Pre-meet: Chat + 4 strides + drills	42 min MEET 5 (3K) WU + race + CD	40 min Chat recovery Durability A	38 min Game: Stacked Deck 4 face cards x 2 min	Optional adventure run	190 min ~20 mi
11	50 min Long run (Chat)	18 min Pre-meet: Chat + 4 strides + drills	42 min MEET 6 (3K) WU + race + CD	32 min Chat recovery Durability B	26 min Game: Progression Pursuit 2 x 1000m · Durability A	Optional adventure run	168 min ~17.5 mi
12	42 min Long run (Chat)	18 min Pre-meet: Chat + 4 strides + drills	42 min CHAMPIONSHIP (3K) WU + race + CD	18 min Chat recovery	18 min Game: The Quiet Mile Chat + strides	Season celebration	138 min ~14.5 mi

Weeks 4 and 8 are down weeks and they are not optional. Peak is week 10, at the 20 mile cap. Adjust any single day plus or minus five minutes freely. Adjust the week only downward. Mile equivalents assume roughly nine and a half minutes per mile. Adjust the equivalents for your team, not the minutes.

How to run this plan

The five gears, the rules, and the weekly ramp.

GEAR	KID NAME	WHAT IT IS	TALK TEST	HIGH SCHOOL NAME
1	Chat	Almost everything we run. Recovery and aerobic development.	Full sentences, easily.	Easy
2	Steady	Comfortably fast.	Full sentences, with rhythm.	LT1 steady
3	Strong	Comfortably hard.	Three or four words.	LT2 threshold
4	Race	Only on race day. We do not train here.	A word or two.	VO2max
5	Zoom	8 to 10 sec hill sprints, 15 to 20 sec strides. Full recovery.	Too short to talk.	Hills and strides

THE RULES THAT NEVER CHANGE

1. Play is training, not a reward for finishing training.
2. Set the dose before they see the game.
3. Ninety percent of the running is Chat pace.
4. Count minutes, not miles.
5. One hard effort per week. On race weeks, the race is it.
6. Never add volume and intensity in the same week.
7. Take the down week. They feel good because of it.
8. Assign levels by training age, not grade or talent.
9. Caps are ceilings, not targets.
10. Every practice ends with them wanting more.

READING THE SCHEDULE

Everything is minutes. Minutes are running only. The seventeen-minute Athlete Base warm-up and the cool-down are not counted.

Durability A and B are the two bodyweight strength sessions. Fifteen to twenty minutes, after the run, never the day before a meet.

Saturday is optional and not counted in the totals. Never assign it, never track it, and never mention who did it.

Shorter season? Start at week 3 and run weeks 3 to 12 for ten weeks. For eight weeks, also cut weeks 6 and 7. Never cut a down week.

All first-year runners? Run this structure and cut every listed time by about twenty-five percent.

One coaching idea every Saturday, written for coaches: coachsaltmarsh.com/newsletter

THE WEEKLY RAMP

WK	MINUTES	~MILES	WHAT IS HAPPENING
1	115	~12	All Chat pace. Learn the gears, the warm-up, the names.
2	128	~13.5	All Chat plus strides. First Gear Check whistles.
3	142	~15	Add hill sprints. First Steady blocks inside a game.
4 ↓	115	~12	Down week. Keep strides and games.
5	150	~16	Meet 1. The race is the only hard effort.
6	160	~17	Meet 2.
7	172	~18	Meet 3.
8 ↓	135	~14	Down week. Predator and Prey on Wednesday.
9	180	~19	Meet 4. First Strong touches return.
10	190	~20	Meet 5. At the cap. This is the peak.
11	168	~17.5	Meet 6. Volume begins falling.
12	138	~14.5	Championship. Short, crisp, confident.



All three levels

Explorer at 15 mpw and Bridge at 25 mpw, day by day, plus the game manual and 36 print-and-post pages. Scan, or go to coachsaltmarsh.com/kit

The games, and what to race

The coach sets the dose before the athletes see the wrapper. The physiological dose is identical to a conventional workout. The difference is that they come back next year. Doses below are Builder level.

GAME	WEEKS	GEAR	BUILDER DOSE	HOW TO RUN IT
The Quiet Mile	1, 12	Chat	Full listed session	One whistle at random. Everyone says a full sentence to the runner beside them.
Caterpillar	2	Chat	Surge every 40 sec	Single file line. The last runner surges to the front, then the new last runner goes.
Traffic Light	3, 9	Steady, Strong	4 x 3 min Steady (wk 3) 4 x 2 min Strong (wk 9)	Call green, yellow, red off a written card. They shout the gear back. The card is the dose.
Sharks & Minnows	4	Zoom / play	10 to 15 min, plus Chat run	Cone grid, tag format. Acceleration and change of direction disguised as the best part of the week.
Coin Flip Hills	6	Zoom	6 x 8 sec	Flip at the bottom. Heads is a sprint, tails is a free pass. Everybody walks down.
Beat the Coach	7	Steady	1.5 mi, handicap start	Announce your time first, then assign head starts from real race data. Aim to be caught by most of them.
Predator & Prey	8	Strong	9 min, staggered start	Slowest starts first so the field converges at the end. Everyone runs the same duration.
Stacked Deck	10	Strong	4 face cards x 2 min	Draw a card each lap. Build the deck the night before with exactly as many face cards as you want efforts.
Progression Pursuit	11	Steady to Strong	2 x 1000m	Lap two must be faster than lap one, but by no more than fifteen seconds. Too fast also loses.

RACING

Race 3K. That is the USATF Junior Olympic championship distance for ages 9 through 12 and it covers most of a middle school roster. Thirteen and fourteen year olds move to 4K. If your league runs a mile and a half or two miles, run what the league runs.

Six races, maximum. No individual athlete should run more than six in a season. Rotate. First-year runners should race four or five times, because those races are the only high-intensity work in the whole plan.

Teach three things. The first two hundred meters, which every middle school race takes out too fast. The middle, where the only job is to pass one person. And the last two hundred, practiced at the end of easy runs until the finish is a reflex.

Volume, race distances, and season length are set against USATF Foundation youth coaching guidance, RRCA FUNDamentals of Youth Running, and USATF Junior Olympic cross country competition standards. This is general education, not medical advice. Clear existing injuries with a qualified professional before starting any training plan.

The kit has the program

You have one level. If you are coaching a real roster you have first-year runners and third-season eighth graders on the same field, and you probably have high schoolers on it too.

- Explorer (15 mpw) and Bridge (25 mpw), day by day
- The Coach's Guide and the full game menu, every dose
- The Athlete Base, all three blocks
- Strength and Durability Phase 1
- Running one practice for grades 5 through 12
- 36 print-and-post pages

coachsaltmarsh.com/kit

Coaching high school too? The 22-Week XC Season Blueprint runs these same five gears at varsity volume, so an eighth grader walks in already speaking the language. coachsaltmarsh.com/season-blueprint

More from Coach Saltmarsh, all free

How to coach middle school cross country

The reasoning behind every number on this sheet. Practice structure, meet day, the injuries you will actually see, and how to run grades 5 through 12 on one field.

coachsaltmarsh.com/how-to-coach-middle-school-cross-country

12 workouts disguised as games

All twelve games, not just the nine here. Every setup, every dose, and the way each one falls apart with eleven-year-olds.

coachsaltmarsh.com/middle-school-cross-country-workouts-games

How many miles should a 12-year-old run?

The parent-facing version, for when somebody wants to argue about mileage. What the AAP, NATA, and the RRCA actually publish.

coachsaltmarsh.com/how-many-miles-should-a-12-year-old-run