

THE CROSS COUNTRY TO MARATHON SUCCESS FORMULA

By DON SIKORSKI
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Good cross country runners make good marathoners. And while most all of the elite distance runners in the world specialize their training focus towards one specific race distance, any good coach call tell you that there are plenty of benefits from using races of various distances as steps in a training plan pointing towards the big picture. Cross country racing is the perfect compliment to almost any program.

California's Ryan Hall had plenty of experience racing competitive cross-country events, so his appearance at this weekend's U.S. National Cross-Country championships comes as no surprise. And with a convincing win at last November's U.S. Olympic Marathon Trials race in New York City, Hall once again finds himself the favorite despite the fact that his clear focus is on racing 26.2 miles of pavement. Hall's long range goals are to hit the streets of London on April 13th for the Flora London Marathon, the same scene where he debuted at the marathon distance a year ago with outstanding results. His 7th place finish and 2:08:24 clocking was the fastest debut ever by an American marathoner and sent a message to the rest of the Olympic hopefuls that Ryan Hall was the real deal. He was face one of the finest marathon fields ever assembled in London again this time, with plenty of runners looking to prepare for this Summer's Olympic Games. Hall can prove himself to be a serous medal contender with another strong effort in London. This weekend's cross country racing will hopefully prove to be the proper preparation.

The cross-country success equals marathon success formula has a long standing history. Bill Rodgers finished 3rd in the 1975 World Cross-Country Championships race before going on to clock 4 Boston Marathon and 4 New York City Marathon wins soon after. Portugal's Carlos Lopes was an outstanding cross-country runner. He shocked the world in winning the 1984 Olympic Marathon at the age of 37. Alberto Salazar tore up cross-country courses for the University of Oregon and finished 2nd at the 1982 World Cross Country championships before setting an American record in his marathon debut a year later. Frank Shorter won four consecutive U.S. Cross-Country titles from 1970-1973 and earned a gold medal in the 1972 Olympic Marathon. Joan Benoit, John Treacy, Grete Waitz, and Steve Jones are other prime examples of runners that posted excellent cross-country credentials prior to finding marathon success. Hall himself won the 12-K U.S. Cross Country Championship race at Van Cortlandt Park in 2006 by a comfortable margin. Hall's Coach Terrence Mahon, himself a former national class distance runner, has strategically plotted Hall's transition to longer distances, evident by his win at the Houston Half Marathon in January 2007 in a U.S. record time of 59:43, bettering Mark Curp's 20+ year old record in the process. The strength, stamina, and metal toughness required to perform well at cross-country provide the foundation for the disciplines of racing the marathon distance.

Dathan Ritzenhein, 3rd in last year's race and runner-up to Hall in the Trials race last November, should give Hall his stiffest challenge. The top three finishers will earn the opportunity to compete at the IAAF World Cross Country Championships in Edinburgh, Scotland, on March 30th. With London and the Olympic Marathon waiting, Hall will likely pass on the offer should he earn a spot. But the experience from this effort should hopefully provide a springboard to 2008 Beijing Olympic success for Hall this summer.

The 2008 USA Cross Country Championships will take place in San Diego's Mission Bay Park with a total of seven races on tap, and will serve as the qualifying trials race for the I.A.A.F. World Cross Country Championships in Edinburgh, Scotland on March 30th. If history holds true, look for the next great American marathoners to emerge from this group.

Racing Roundup

Youth counts for plenty, but Norwich's Tim Smith can still run with the youngsters. Smith, 59, finished 2nd overall at the J.P. Morgan 4 Miler in Hartford on February 10th. The winner was 15 year-old Sean Mueller of Cheshire. The race is part of the Hartford Track Club's Winter Series.....It was reported that the first ever sub 4 minute mile run on Connecticut soil took place on February 2nd at Yale's Cox Cage. Georgetown's Andrew Bumbalough clocked 3:58.46 to win the Giegenack Invitational mile. The time earned Bumbalough, a former Footlocker National XC runner-up, an automatic qualifying spot in the NCAA Championships. UConn's Will Sanders finished 7th in 4:13.43.....Colorado's Pat Porter claimed eight consecutive U.S. Cross-Country Championships from 1982-1989. What runner ended this streak by defeating Porter in the 1990 race at New York's Van Courtland Park?

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