



THE JOURNAL OF YOUTH RUNNING

BELONGING

BEING PART OF A TEAM

William Bowerman's book *Jogging* (Grosset & Dunlap, 1967), moved running beyond a sport reserved just for the young and the fast, and mostly men. *Jogging* empowered entire generations, athletic or not, men or women, rural or urban, to get moving. It ignited "the running boom," now measured in tens of millions of runners who hit the roads and trails every day.

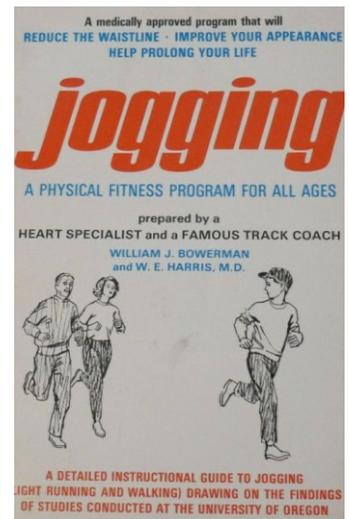
Bowerman, the renowned University of Oregon coach and co-founder of NIKE, understood running was more than physical and more than measured by the first runner to cross the finish line. He wrote of the importance of being with others, of enjoying the shared experience, of belonging as integral to being motivated to run.

Dr. Eric Berne, in the same time frame, authored the best-selling book, *Games People Play*. Berne coined the term "stroke" to mean the verbal and nonverbal communication we receive from others whom we value; the quick nod, the pat on the shoulder, our sharing space together, the feeling of being part of the team, of belonging.

Today, adults, many who are new to running, join a "running team" sponsored by an athletic shoe store, or maybe a charity leading up to some popular local race. They join not to compete, but because they want to belong; it is the strokes they enjoy, the shared experience. This gives them confidence, a reason to run, long before they see themselves as runners.

If it is important to adults, think what the feeling of belonging does for young runners. It can give them a reason to run; the companionship, the identity and a sense of pride, of being part of something special. But with children and teens, belonging does not just happen.

Parents, teachers and coaches have the opportunity, and today, even the responsibility, to foster an environment where children and teens belong; where they have shared experiences, are part of a team, where they accomplish something together. When this environment exists, children and youth will be empowered to accept others as teammates; to work together to accomplish team goals. To young runners, this sense of belonging is integral to being motivated to run.



Bowerman's formula was simple. Just get moving, enjoy the company and discover fitness.

START YOUNG RUNNERS EARLY...

For elementary school-aged children who run in a mileage or fitness program during recess, Bowerman's sense of belonging, being a part of a team, can be inspired by the teacher or parent that creates team and classroom goals, by structuring runs where children are cheering for each other. Here are six tips that create belonging.

☑ Relays are perfect for creating a sense of being part of a team; but not relays where speed is the only factor. For this, just make up relays to suit the situation. In *Fun and Fitness - The Mileage Club Way* (published by Fitness Finders, 2016) these are Zany Relays, those incorporating some obstacle-course aspect or with kids carrying something (other than a relay baton) to be passed off to the next runner, or even loops where the runners must solve a puzzle together before the next runner can start.

☑ Instead of each child recording only the number of laps they log around the playground, have a fish bowl in the classroom (or better yet in the school office) and award a marble to each child for each five miles they record. The marble goes in the fish bowl. Filling the bowl becomes a very visible goal for the class; a goal to which every child can contribute. Or, from Fitness Finders, order a map of America so the classroom can track their miles in a run across the country.

☑ Time the runners (the finishing time for each runner) for a standard distance: a half mile, twice around the playground, whatever. Record and total the times to establish a team or classroom record. Repeat this later in the season or year and challenge the runners to break their own record. Each runner, whether the fastest or slowest, will contribute to the "record setting" time. At the end of the school year the record is erased, and a new record set the following year.

☑ Encourage parents to help organize a classroom running team, one that enters a local Fun Run together, all wearing their own team T-shirt. Most Fun Runs are free so just give directions and identify a time and place to meet. A parent can help organize the kids as a team on the starting line, with other parents along the course to cheer for every runner. And, of course, plan on lots of team photos after the run.

☑ For children who are ready to run or alternate running with walking, pick a big charity run where they can run as a team; enjoy the festive atmosphere, the crowd, the sense of being part of something important, crossing the finishing line with arms raised high, with little concern over time or place.

☑ If a road race in your area is looking for volunteers, consider having your team -- again in their team T-shirts -- staff an aid station along the course. Let the kids fill and hand out cups of water, and of course, clean up after. Most kids love it and it will give them exposure to running -- far better than just watching the action from the side of the road. Best yet, it will strengthen the feeling of being part of something, of belonging.

With the goal being to create a sense of belonging, don't let the kids pick their relay partners. Do it by drawing names or some other means that allows kids who are not as fast as others to be included, not ignored.



Even in a Fun Run, kids like to be in the front row on the starting line. Keeping them toward the back will make it less likely they will start too fast and tire quickly, and they will gain confidence as they pass runners versus being passed.

...AND KEEP IT GOING

For teens, it is all about coaches being interested in every runner, helping them find their niche, the place where they belong, regardless of how fast or slow they run. A place where coaches and team captains buy in on every runner being part of the family; with each runner helping support the team goals. Sure, some will never find their way to the varsity, but they may find their place, their comfort zone, their working as a team, their belonging. Here are tips from five top coaches on building a sense of belonging.

☑ Bill Sumner is Head Boys and Girls Track and Cross-Country coach at California's Corona Del Mar High School. His resume includes 18 California Interscholastic Federation titles, eight California state titles and two national titles. In his team-building tool kit is the requiring (and testing) of each runner on his team to name all the other runners on the team on demand. He reports kids pride themselves by knowing every name.

☑ Mike Smith coached at Saline HS (Mich.) for 38 seasons, retiring on a high note of being honored by the National High School Coaches Association as *2016 Cross Country Coach of the Year*. During his tenure, Mike instituted a BIG SISTERS program where at the beginning of each season the juniors and seniors signed up to "adopt" one or two freshmen, to make them feel welcome, to belong; to be a contributing part of a team environment.

☑ Colleen Phelps has built the *STRIVERS Running Team for Girls* (Natick, Mass.) around a sense of community; that when they work together, they can make positive things happen. Each season her runners undertake a community project, such as collecting back packs or food for the local service council or assisting in fundraising for a cause the girls understand as being important.

☑ The late Joe Newton coached York High School in Elmhurst, Illinois to 28 state cross country team titles. At the big meets, Newton assigned a job to every member of the team not racing (recording splits, prompting runners with the team's race plan at specific intervals along the course, etc.). Joe's intent: to give every team member ownership in the team's success.

☑ Mike Woolsey has coached his Jackson (Mich.) Lumen Christi HS Girls Cross Country team to nine state titles and a state finalist in 38 of his 40 years of coaching. At the core of the Lumen Christi success are traditions passed down to the next generation of runners, not by the coach, but the runners themselves. One is "Movie Night" at coach Woolsey's house every Friday night through the season. They watch movies that inspire; they love hearing the coach's great stories, and they continue the traditions, those of the team.



With new runners, belonging is easier to realize when they don't compete but work as a team.

Lisa Rainsberger was an All-American at the University of Michigan in swimming, track and cross country and winner of both the Boston and Chicago marathons. She talks about the importance of children and teens belonging; of being with their "village"; of being accepted. "Belonging is what keeps them engaged. Being on a team is their village, a place where they can grow; where they can experience success."

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