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SPORTS

The Lombardi of Teen Running

High School Coach Bill Aris Has Won Nine National Titles by Stressing Teamwork Over Individuality



Bill Aris, a high school cross-country coach in suburban Syracuse, N.Y, talks to his team before nationals. *MARNIE CARTER*

By **KEVIN HELLIKER**

Dec. 12, 2014 7:42 p.m. ET

In all of sports, few leaders are more accomplished than Bill Aris, a high school cross-country coach in suburban Syracuse, N.Y.

It isn't just that his teams have won nine national titles in nine years, including sweeping the boys' and girls' competitions last weekend at the Nike Cross Nationals. It's that Aris coaches at a public school, Fayetteville-Manlius High, meaning that he can't recruit outside its modest-sized district.

Also, his teams usually lack superstars. No runner of his ever finished first at nationals. Last weekend, his fastest girl finished 11th—but her teammates finished 12th, 13th, 14th and 20th, giving their squad the team title.

“There's something special going on at that program, for it to win year after year,” says Bob Larsen, a former UCLA cross-country coach who now coaches professional stars such as Meb Keflezighi.

“I certainly view Aris as the greatest high school cross-country coach in history,” says Robert Johnson, a former collegiate running coach who co-founded the website LetsRun.com.

Yet Aris's success isn't rooted in the particulars of his workouts. “He doesn't have any training program that anybody else doesn't know about,” says Marc Bloom, a Runner's World writer who has followed high-school cross country for decades. “It's a mental thing.”

Aris, 59, came to coaching by accident. After losing his mid-level management job in an early '90s round of layoffs, he started volunteering as a running coach at FM, as Fayetteville-Manlius is known. His expertise was drawn from his personal experience as a recreational marathoner whose personal best was 2:41.

By the time Aris became head coach at FM in 2004, he had adopted the so-called Stotan philosophies of the late Australian running coach Percy Cerutti, whose star runner Herb Elliott won an Olympic gold medal at the 1960 Games. Stotan—a merging of stoic and Spartan principles—combines the study of philosophy with disciplined eating, sleeping and training, as well as devotion to one's teammates.

“It's a lifestyle, one that some people see as extreme,” says Aris.

His runners tend to eschew traditions widely regarded as the birthright of American adolescents: Friday night football games, Saturday night dances, week-night

rendezvous at local fast-food joints. Parents seem to love it. “It’s all the values a parent wants to instill in a child—working hard at school, working hard on the team, skipping that party because you could catch a bug there that would hurt the team,” says Catherine Chapman, whose two daughters won partial scholarships to run in college after running on Aris teams.

“People would say, ‘You have to give up your life, your high school years, for running,’” says Jillian Fanning, a 2013 FM graduate who says the experience prepared her for Providence College running, where she says practices are no more onerous than she experienced in high school. “It’s not a sacrifice if you’re making the choice to do it, and if you’re loving it.”

Anonymous critics on running-site message boards have characterized Aris as a tyrant who runs his kids too hard, detracts from their academic pursuits and patrols the school cafeteria yanking junk food out of their hands—all charges that Aris and several of his former runners and their parents deny. “Every time our program is successful, all the haters come out of the woodwork,” says Aris.

According to several runners and parents interviewed for this story, Aris is emphatic that academics come before sports. They also note that if he ran the kids too hard, his athletes wouldn’t be healthy enough to win national titles at the end of the season. “His secret is that he’s inspirational,” says Ellen Fanning, whose two daughters ran for Aris. “After meeting him, I went out at age 47 and ran my first half marathon.”

In a sport where winning is dependent on team performance, Aris engenders a sense of community. Unlike many college coaches, who lavish attention on their fastest runners, Aris convinces his slower athletes that they can become fast—and must do so for the sake of the team. “Looking back, I spent all my free time in high school with the track and cross country guys,” says Owen Kimple, a self-described slowpoke when he joined the team who wound up running collegiately. “They were my brothers.”

With a few exceptions, Aris’s runners haven’t torn it up collegiately, leading some observers to question whether Aris burned them out. Retorts Aris, “Every one of our kids is developed to do their best running after high school—if they so choose.”

Larsen, the former UCLA coach, is no expert on Aris’s program. But he posits a different theory: If not for running on an Aris team, “these kids may never have gotten a college running scholarship at all,” says Larsen.

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