

How to Watch a Cross-Country Meet

Contrary to popular belief, cross-country can be an exciting spectator sport—if you know what to watch for. This guide explains what goes on at a cross-country meet, and will help you get more enjoyment out of watching a meet, no matter what the weather!

1. Cross-Country Scoring

Races are much more exciting when you know which team is winning. The first thing to know about cross-country is that *the team with the low score wins the meet.*

Basic Scoring

In Cross Country meets, the top seven runners from each team are awarded points based on their overall finishing positions. In other words, the winner of the race is awarded one (1) point; second place is awarded two (2) points; and so on. A team's score is the total of the points earned by its first five finishers. The team with the lowest score wins.

EXAMPLE:

Team A's top five runners finish 1st, 3rd, 6th, 9th, and 11th. **Team A's score = $1+3+6+9+11 = 30$.**

Team B's top five runners finish 2nd, 4th, 5th, 7th, and 8th. **Team B's score = $2+4+5+7+8 = 26$.**

Even though, Team A took two out of the top three places, **Team B wins, 26-30.**

Displacement

In the example above, even though Team B's sixth runner (10th) did not directly contribute to Team B's score, he or she contributed to the overall victory by bumping up, or "displacing" Team A's fifth runner, who finished 11th.

However, no matter how many runners a team might have, only seven runners "count" in the scoring so, only the sixth and seventh runners can displace an opposing runner (or runners). Therefore, no scoring runner can be assigned a point value greater than 12.

Interesting Cross-Country Scoring Facts

- A very close meet (with no displacements) will end in a score of 27-28.
- With displacements, a meet can end in a tie, for example 28-28 or 29-29.
- The lowest (best) score possible is 15 points ($1+2+3+4+5$); The highest (worst) score possible is 50 points ($8+9+10+11+12$). Thus, the most lopsided victory possible is to win with a score of 15-50.
- In a meet between two teams, if one team takes the top three places, they automatically win, no matter how far back their 4th and 5th runner finish, because their score can't be worse than $1+2+3+11+12$ (29) while the other team's score can be no better than $4+5+6+7+8$ (30).
- In a meet between three teams, the meet is scored as though it were three separate dual meets. For example, when Teams A, B, and C run a meet, the results are scored as AvB, AvC, and BvC.
- In a large meet with many teams, runners can be displaced much farther down in the standings. This means that it is possible, however unlikely, for a team to take the top 3 (or even *top 4*) places and *not* win the meet. For example, Team A's top five runners finish 1st, 2nd, 3rd, 4th, and 69th (79 points). Team B's top five runners finish 7th, 11th, 14th, 19th, and 24th (75 points). Although Team A would have crushed Team B in a dual meet, Team B actually beats Team A 75-79 in the big meet.

In big meets, the 4th and 5th runners are very important!!

2. Strategy

Strategy in distance running is a subtle art that depends on knowing one's own ability, the ability of one's opponent, and the challenges presented by the course and the distance. With courage, savvy, and determination, a runner can use this knowledge to make things more difficult for rival runners.

For example, in a race between a runner from Team A and a runner of comparable ability from Team B, the runner from Team A might decide to run the first part of the race harder, in hopes of opening a gap on the Team B runner. Faced with the gap, the Team B runner might become discouraged and give up chasing the Team A runner, since the pursuit seems hopeless.

On the other hand, the Team B runner might know that the Team A runner always tries this tactic. In this case, the Team B runner might run cautiously—just fast enough to maintain visual contact, prepared to push hard at the moment when the Team A runner is likely to falter in the late stages of the race.

(However, early caution can also be dangerous, if it leaves a runner too far back to take advantage of all that extra energy at the end of the race. This is the origin of the common observation that a runner has “too much left” if that runner is able to sprint the last 200 meters much faster than all the other runners.)

Knowledge of a course can also be an advantage. If the runner from Team A knows that there is a steep hill that occurs with half a mile to go, he or she might choose that point in the race to “go for broke” and break away from the Team B runner. If the Team A runner trains on that hill every day, it is likely to be less intimidating to him or her than to a runner who is running it for the first time. Thus, there is such a thing as a home course advantage in cross-country.

Finally, there is the matter of who has the fastest sprint at the finish. A runner who typically has a very fast sprint can concentrate on running just behind a runner with a slower sprint, whereas the runner with the slower sprint must find a way to “break” the other runner and open a gap before the final few hundred meters.

Keeping all of the above in mind, sometimes a race isn't about strategy at all but about “who wants it” more on that particular day. All the strategy in the world will never make up for the pure desire that makes a runner push through all the discomfort to the end of the race.

3: How to Cheer for Distance Runners

Runners like to have spectators cheering for them, since it helps them muster the courage to see a race through to its end. It means a lot to a runner when you are out there cheering in inclement weather! However, in their fatigued and vulnerable state, runners tend to prefer certain kinds of encouragement.

Here's a concise summary to help you "say the right thing" when you see your runner come along with hair plastered to his or her head and mud up and down his or her back:

Good

- Positive statements using the runner's name:
"Go Jason!"
"Great job, Chris!"
- Anything positive about the runner's form or position in the race, as long as it is at least marginally believable:
"Looking good!"
"You're looking great!"
"Way to go! You're running a great race!"
(if they are closer to the front than usual)
"They're coming back to you!"
- Anything that directs their attention to maintaining their form:
"That's it, stay relaxed!"
"Stay smooth!"
"Open up!"
"Drive your arms!"
(in the final 100 meters)
- Anything that focuses their efforts on a single attainable goal:
"You can catch this guy!"
"Work this hill!"

Bad

- Appeals to run faster, move up, or pass people who are obviously better runners:
"You're too far back!"
"Faster, faster!"
(especially bad early in the race)
"Get up there"
(when "there" is at the front, and the runner doesn't belong up there)
- Attempts to downplay the (considerable) remaining work required:
"Only a mile to go!"
(I HATE this one)
"You're only 30 seconds behind!"
(Making up half a minute in a 5K race is essentially impossible unless the other guy falls in a hole or is attacked by wild dogs.)