COACHING MIDDLE SCHOOL CROSS COUNTRY
by Bill Greiten

Bill Greiten - Head Boys’ and Girls’ Cross Country coach at Gillett (WI) High School and Middle School. He established this program in 1997. The boys qualified for the state meet in 1999, 2000, and 2002 - the only teams in the school's history to appear in a state championship meet. Previously, Greiten coached 26 years at Case High School in Racine, WI. He was the boys’ head cross country coach; during that time, 18 teams qualified for the state meet with 14 finishing in the top ten and three winning state titles. Greiten is considered one of the more knowledgeable and respected individuals in distance running in the Midwest. He is involved with both the Footlocker National High School Championship and the NAIA National Cross Country Championship meets. He was inducted into the Wisconsin Cross Country Coaches Association's Hall of Fame in 1993.

Concepts on Middle School Cross Country
For many athletes this may be their first experience with competitive running or organized sports, so the positive feeling of inclusion for everyone is important. At the first meeting everyone tries on a team uniform and warmup in order to see that everyone will be outfitted properly. We do this to show them that everyone on the team is treated equally whether they are a sixth grader, out for the first time, or an eighth grader who has been with us for the two previous seasons. It also gives the new runners a chance to see, touch, and feel the gear they will wear in competition.

Parent involvement
I send a letter home to the parents explaining our goals for the program. A meet schedule and an open invitation to call or stop by and see me so we can work together to make this a great experience for their athlete is included.

Team athletes
New members are welcomed any time during the season. I have found that some students have a wait-and-see attitude. If their friends are having fun and are successful, they may find the courage to give our sport a chance. Some of our better runners have come out later in the season.

Training and competition
Training for our program is set up on a few basic principles. It should be fun. Each athlete should train at a level he/she can handle. It is based on continual growth over the seven years they will be at Gillett.

Our races are usually 1 1/4 - 1 1/2 miles long, with the exception of our last race which is a 4K. Therefore, we train as if you were a miler with a good deal of time spent on 200 to 800 meter repeats. At no time do we want them to run full out, but rather to work at a fast but relaxed, controlled pace. This will allow them to establish good form and a kinetic sense of rhythm and balance.

Our season is six weeks long - from the beginning of school to the middle of October. However, many of our older middle school runners start with the high school team in mid-August. We train 90 percent of the time on a snowmobile trail or grass at the high school; these surfaces allow more work and avoid injuries that hard surfaces may cause. We practice Monday, Tuesday, Thursday, and Friday. Wednesdays are set aside for the church services and/or instruction. Athletes are also encouraged to attend a Saturday practice with the high school team.
Warmups
Our practices start with a 3/4 mile warm-up run, at their own pace, followed by light stretching and a series of drills. These are designed to increase strength, coordination, and balance. The duration and intensity is increased throughout the season. This precedes every day’s training.

An example of a week’s workout:

Monday: Three to six X 600 meter runs with four minute recovery walk between. The recovery time is decreased as they progress. (Some run three, some run all six, depending on their fitness levels.) The recovery walk is a run for our more experienced athletes who don’t like to just walk. This workout builds an anaerobic base which is needed in a race of 1 1/2 miles.

Tuesday: A 20 to 40 minute run on the trail. It is marked every half mile so they run for time but know the distance that they are covering. This promotes endurance.

Thursday: Three to eight X 200 to 800 meter runs, depending on where we run and where we are in the season. We run longer distances early in the season and shorter ones near the end of the season. The last 150 meters of the 600 and 800 are down a slight grade.

Friday: 25 to 45 minutes on a hilly road course, for a set amount of time, and at a pace they feel comfortable with. We concentrate on working the uphill portion of the run. This portion of the workout builds strength and endurance.

We encourage them to ride a bike for an hour on Saturdays and Sundays.

Fun workouts: Split the team up - three runners and two bikes, or two runners and one bike for the more experienced runners. We race a total 18 miles. We race from Gillett to the next town (Suring) and back, on the trail, switching from bike to running. Each team figures out how much of each and when to switch. This is done with the whole team, high school and middle school. They ask about it every year. “When are we doing the trail race?” There are some younger ones who just ride up and back because that is all they can handle. Of course, I ride the trail and try to keep track of it all.

Another tradition is the ice cream ride. Using the same trail to Suring, everyone rides hard and meets at the custard stand. The ride back is easy and relaxed. Both these workouts are 18 miles, round trip; you can choose whatever distance works in your area.

Training philosophy
Our concentration is to keep the workouts 1 to 1 1/4 hours long and to provide only the amount of stress we feel the athletes can handle. During the workouts, they decide when they have had enough and want to cool down and stretch. This is done so they have an investment in the process. Over the years, we have found that they make pretty good decisions. Many times they elect to do more than we thought they could. We also stress that racing is the purpose of the training and over-doing can lead to injury and missed races. Since we are a small school with limited numbers, we pride ourselves on having everyone on the line on race days.

I hope you have picked up an idea or two that will be useful in your own program. Good luck.