

10 Keys for Great XC Races in October and November

Read Time – 6 minutes

If you're a serious high school XC runner, then you're no doubt excited to have your best races of the year in October and November. Here are ten keys to remember that will help you race to your fitness level in the biggest meets of the year.

1. You Don't Need an A+ Race

If you want to help your team advance to the next meet, or to place high at the state meet, you don't need an A+ race. You simply need a solid race to help your team. If every athlete, yourself included, has B+ races, you'll be thrilled with the team score.

If you're going to be the lone qualifier to the next meet, or you're the only person from your team at the state meet, the same idea holds: If you have a solid race, you'll have a great performance overall as much of the competition will have off days (because they aimed for the A+ race).

The flip side is that when you put pressure on yourself to have the best race of your life at the biggest meet of your life, the chance of having a bad race increase.

So do yourself a favor and have high expectations for yourself, but don't put pressure on yourself to have an A+ race.

2. Trust Running Less

The volume – counted in miles or minutes - you've run since the summer has set you up to race fast in these final meets. Great job!

Now you've got to trust your coach's plan, which likely has you running a bit less compared to what you ran in September and in the summer. You've gained all the aerobic fitness you're going to gain, and now is the time to have fresh legs and be mentally ready to race.

3. "The Hay is in the Barn"

My college coach at the University of Colorado would say this in the final week of the season.

What does it mean?

It means that the hard work of training is done, and now is the time to trust how the training is slightly different in the last week or two of the season. If this sounds like the previous point, it is. It's a phrase you and your teammates can use to remind yourself that the right training and preparation for the big meets is different than the right training you did in July, August, and September.

4. "What's in my control?"

Ask yourself this question: Is the weather in your control? Obviously not.

Is the energy of parents, coaches, and teammates – positive or negative – in your control? Nope.

Are the course conditions in your control? Not at all.

Focus on what's in your control the week of the big meet, the night before the big meet, and the day of the big meet. Keep a calm mind, be the "right level of excited" to race, and be clear about what you can control.

5. Bad Weather Is Good

Most high school athletes struggle with the previous point and get nervous (or panic) when they must race in bad weather, or race on a muddy course.

This view isn't going to help you.

You know that both weather and course conditions are out of your control, so you simply need to do two things: Execute your coach's race plan and remind yourself during the warm-up that you're capable of having a great race.

It's worth noting that in every state a team "surprisingly" wins a conference meet or a state meet, upsetting the pre-race favorites, when the weather is bad (or miserable). Yet when you look at the results, the winning team simply had five solid performances on a bad weather day, while the favorites going in faltered and ran poorly.

If the weather forecast looks unfavorable, you should grin and think, "This is great for me and my team. Let's go!"

6. Know the Plan, Confirm the Plan

You've got to listen to your coach when they give you the race plan.

Simple enough.

And...

Consider taking 60-120 seconds and re-iterating to them what you heard them say so you're absolutely sure you know the plan. It's easy in the final days of the season to be so energetic about racing that you slightly misinterpret what your coach is saying. Most coaches won't mind if you come up to them and clarify the plan.

7. Ten Quick Steps

One of the best coaches in the country, Dan Iverson, who has coached two different girls' teams to top three finishes at NXN, asks his athletes to take "10 quick steps" during a race.

Why?

Even the best high school XC runners will zone out for a moment or two during a 5k race. When this happens and someone is coming up on your shoulder, or someone is pulling away from you, just think "10 quick steps" and you'll almost certainly be able to speed up.

If you have a workout or two left in the season, try it during a longer repetition so you can see how powerful it is.

Trust me on this one: 10 quick steps once or twice in the race will help you race faster.

8. Sleep – The First Point

“Sleep is like the secret ingredient in the recipe of running success” is a quote in [Consistency Is Key](#). In the final weeks and days of the season, you need to get as much sleep as you can, which we both know is hard as a busy student-athlete.

But don't deceive yourself: If you make choices to stay up later than you have all year, or don't take advantage of the nights when your homework load is light, you're not doing everything you can to race well. This is the time to get an extra 15-20 minutes a sleep a night, which I think we can both agree is a reasonable goal.

[Here](#) is a great Twitter thread on sleep by performance expert Steve Magness, and [here](#) is the short chapter on sleep from [Consistency Is Key](#).

9. Sleep – The Second Point

If you sleep poorly the night before the race, or you sleep poorly two nights in a row before the race, don't fret – this happens to the best athletes in the world. Your training volume is lower than it's been for months, and you're excited to race, which can lead to a restless night of sleep.

Do everything you can in terms of sleep hygiene – the biggest is being off screens 60-90 minutes before bed. Also, the phrase, “I was up all night” is probably an exaggeration after a night where you didn't sleep well. It no doubt felt that way, but rest assured that you got enough rest to be able to have a great race.

10. You Have What It Takes

You have what it takes to run a great race.

You have what it takes to endure discomfort in the last mile.

You have what it takes to speed up and take 10 quick steps when you see a competitor pulling away from you.

You have what it takes to keep an athlete from passing you.

You have what it takes to run hard in the last 100m, 200m, or even 400m and kick down your competition.

You're prepared and you're ready to race to your fitness level.

Finally...

You don't need to memorize all these points, or even go over them in these final weeks. If one or two resonated with you, think about it once or twice a day.

Again, remember that **you have what it takes to run a great race.**

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