

## We Are Only Strong Working Together

Matthew Pegorari

### **Introduction**

In recent months, middle school students have been allowed to participate in high school cross-country running. When this new program was implemented, it created a lot of controversy amongst participants. The high school and middle school runners had a difficult time creating relationships with each other due to several factors. One clear problem is that there is a difference in maturity between seniors and seventh graders. Another is that there was tension toward the middle school runners due to their inappropriate language and gestures during practice. Another issue that arose is the high school and middle school runners had different ideas about what work ethic and being a part of a high school varsity team really means. Because there are many changes for younger athletes competing at a higher level with high school students, this type of transition can be very difficult for some and can increase the probability of them acting out, becoming stressed, or not wanting to compete. Middle school athletes will be held to higher academic, social and athletic expectations than they have previously experienced in a middle school setting and in a youth sports setting. Having an assigned mentor creates a welcoming environment and potential to address these concerns. I am proposing to develop a mentoring program between middle and high school runners focusing on their physical performance and behavior to make this transition as smooth as possible. This program will not only help the middle school children understand what type of behavior, skills, and work ethic are expected, but more importantly, what it feels like to be a member of a community. I want to create a program that increases comradery, trust and love among my team. It is my goal to turn a large group of diverse runners into a cross-country family.

I found there are many different types of mentoring programs while doing my research. My primary focus is on mentoring programs that occur within schools or mentoring programs among athletes. During my research, I found two articles found in Education Weekly. The first article from *Education Weekly* is titled, "To Fill a 'Mentoring Gap,' Schools Get Creative." This article describes a program that was implemented in a high school where older high school students become peer mentors to upcoming freshmen that may have a difficult time with the transitions of high school. These upper classmen were given class credit to be mentors while helping create a smooth transition for at risk students. The other article, "Peers Help 9<sup>th</sup> Graders Survive Critical Year" is similar but focuses a lot on the specific types of interactions that these eleventh and twelfth grade students have with their mentees. It gives many examples of activities that these mentors and mentees do with one another in and out of school. The article, "A comparison of well-peer mentored and non-peer mentored athletes' perceptions of satisfaction," is a research study comparing mentored athletes vs. non-mentored athletes and their overall satisfaction levels. They found that there was a much higher satisfaction level with their overall athletic experience when they were mentored as opposed to non-mentored athletes. "Effects of Classwide Peer Tutoring on the Performance of Sixth Grade Students during a Volleyball Unit," was a very interesting article about kids teaching each other how to play volleyball. There was a very distinct program where all students were taught how to be good mentors and then used these strategies to help other peers during a volleyball unit. The last piece of research is a study that was done at a South Florida university called, "Impacts of a Peer Mentoring Program on Pre-Service Physical Educators' Development" and this shows how both the mentor and the mentee both benefit from the experience.

#### **Education Weekly Articles**

“To Fill a ‘Mentoring Gap,’ Schools Get Creative” by Evie Blad and “Peers Help 9<sup>th</sup> Graders Survive Critical Year” by Catherine Gewertz, are articles written about very similar topics. Both articles were published in the fall of 2017 and are exemplars for the type of environment that I am looking to created amongst my cross-country team. These are relevant because they both pair upper classmen with lower classmen so that they will have a smooth transition through their high school experiences. The students in “Peers Help 9<sup>th</sup> Graders” eat lunch and breakfast together, have ice cream socials, scavenger hunts and other casual activities to connect. The bonds that are created amongst the older students with the younger students are ongoing and create a comfortable and connected environment. Quoted in Education Week by Gewertz, 2017, Elaine Allensworth, the director of the University of Chicago Consortium on School Research says, “That first year is especially powerful, because it’s the time students are developing their mindsets about whether they belong and can succeed.” Among secondary education students, peer mentoring can help develop social-emotional skills, it can give them a sense of responsibility for and accountability to each other, and has the potential to create relationships important to young people that may otherwise ignore adults as a result of defiance (Gewertz, 2017; Blad, 2017). I want to ensure that these middle school children are being set up to succeed and thrive in an environment created not only by their coach, but also by the student athletes that are surrounding them. All of the athletes on the team need to be responsible and positive role models for these upcoming adolescents. If they lead with excellence, then the middle school children will follow their positive examples.

### **A Comparison of Well-Peer Mentored and Non-Peer Mentored Athletes’ Perceptions of Satisfaction**

This article was written by Matt D. Hoffmann and Todd Loughead in May 2015 and is a very interesting study that collected data on the effects of peer mentoring on athletic performance and overall satisfaction among athletes. Among higher education students, peer mentoring can be a life-altering relationship with profound mutual learning, development and growth opportunities. There are two main types of mentoring programs; formal mentoring is when a mentor and mentee are assigned to one another while informal mentoring is when the relations occur more spontaneously without the assistance of an organization. Both types of mentoring have been found to work and the research shows benefits to both types. The type of program that I want to create is more of a spontaneous type of organization (Hoffman and Loughead, 2016). I will be creating and implementing a mentoring program that all upperclassmen will participate in and be responsible for making connections with these underclassmen. If for some reason there is an underclassman that is not being mentored during the season, then it is possible that a mentor will be assigned so that there will be consistency. In this study, it found that those mentored reported to feel more satisfied with their athletic performance than non-mentored. It seems that no matter the mentoring type, people feel more successful, accepted and happier when having a mentor-mentee relationship. (Hoffman and Loughead, 2016).

**Effects of Class wide Peer Tutoring on the Performance of Sixth Grade Students During a Volleyball Unit**

This article is written by Shiri Ayvazo and Phillip Ward in the winter of 2009. In this article, physical educators teach elementary school children the basic skills for volleyball with all of the teaching techniques that they would normally use. They then taught them how to relay that information to their peers and assess them. Then, they had these mentors use these same skills to teach their peer in the weeks to come. At the end of the unit, there was a significant improvement in basic volleyball skills in the small sample size studied in the volleyball unit (Ayvazo and Ward, 2009). This type of mentoring program is very similar to what I would like to implement. As a cross country team, all of the athletes participating are learning the exact same dynamic stretches, static stretches, warm-up routines, interval workouts, pacing techniques, and nutritional information so that all participating have the opportunity to be successful. Being successful does not necessarily mean being the best on the team. Everyone's overall goal to improve in some way with every practice and race. This is why it is the responsibility of the entire team to mentor these upcoming youth. All veterans to the sport need to be experts in these basic skills in order to help teach them to the new athletes. This type of mentoring allows for more comradery to occur because everyone is working together to achieve similar goals.

### **Impacts of a Peer Mentoring Program on Pre-Service Physical Educators' Development**

Nell Faucette and Peg Nugent wrote this article in 2017. This article explores the different strategies that it takes in order for peer mentoring to work properly and explain that it is very important that all mentors must be trained on the skills that it takes to become a good mentor. There are many different types of programs available that can be customized to work depending on the type of curriculum needed for the program. Some institutions choose volunteers and train them on how to be an effective mentor. At the University of South Florida, mentors along with instructors discussed what types of goals the program hoped to offer their mentees. They had the mentors discuss important skills are needed to be an effective

mentor of less experienced learners, reflect on their previous experiences, and how can they be the most helpful (Faucett and Nugent, 2017). This type of discussion will be a very large part of the mentoring training that I plan to implement. I will have an overall set of goals, strategies, and procedures that will need to be implemented, but I want the veterans to make this program their own. They will help determine key components that they felt were weak or problems that arose when they were younger that we will be able to address and prevent from occurring with the upcoming athletes.

This article also collected data to support that both the mentor and mentee both benefit from the relationship that they create. At the end of one mentoring program, the mentors were asked to reflect on their experiences. They were asked, “Who am I as a mentor?” Adjectives on this experience were “insightful,” “reflective,” “enlightening,” “professional,” and “innovative.” Such positive responses show how the mentors feel about being a mentor (Faucette and Nugent, 2016). I think that this type of program is certainly bilateral and everyone will be benefiting and learning from one another.

### **Conclusion**

After completing the aforementioned research and continuing to do so, I have brainstormed a well thought out format for a successful and meaningful peer-mentoring program for my cross-country team. I want to create an environment that creates a smooth transition for the upcoming runners, but also to develop a community with positive comradery amongst all of the runners. This mentoring program will be beneficial to both the mentors and the mentees in many different ways. This program should be a positive model for other schools to use to aid in the transition and overall experience for younger athletes. If this is done properly, my hope is to create a comfortable, positive, and overall smooth transition for all involved.

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