

expert advice: coach artie gulden

how coaches should approach the topic of weight with their athletes & how to disintegrate the culture of comparison on your cross-country team

1. As a former athlete of yours, I know that you choose not to weigh your athletes as part of their equation for success. Could you explain your rationale to me for that? Why do you choose not to focus on weight?

"Body image and weight are negatively intertwined in women's athletics and distance running in particular. **Weighing athletes will only exacerbate issues in women already struggling with food & their bodies and may cause issues in women who aren't currently struggling.** Weighing athletes encourages them to live by a number, which for some, is really internalized. If that specific number doesn't show up, it's like the end of the world has arrived. Weighing athletes also leads to comparisons which can be harmful for female distance runners. In the end, weighing athletes can only lead to problems."

2. In regards to your comment on comparisons, how do you feel those comparisons affect team unity overall?

"Weighing athletes definitely has the potential to have a negative impact on team unity. Comparisons are already there whether you weigh or not - with the various body types on the team that exist as is. The problem is that **there is no one-size-fits-all body type for running. You do not have to be a certain size or certain weight in order to be successful.** Adding opportunities for comparison only perpetuates this false notion.

It is important to find ways to minimize those comparisons on a team. One of the best ways to do this is by having open conversations with the athletes. As a guy, I choose to take the backseat in these conversations. I bring in the female coaches and school dietitians to take the lead. I am present and add my thoughts, but allow the experts to lead the discussion on comparisons."

3. How do you have open conversations about body image and eating with athletes with whom you don't have exceptional rapport with?

"With many athletes, I don't have a problem talking about these issues, but with others, I fear they would clam up if I was heavily involved in a conversation about body image, eating, etc. However, **I will always have a conversation with an athlete if I notice signs that they need to talk. It would be a disservice to the athlete if I didn't bring it up and refer them to professional help.**

I will always speak up if I see red flags and hopefully not make the athlete too uncomfortable. I don't have personal expertise in this area, but I can give them the resources I know of that will help them. Once I have given the athlete the resources they need, the ball is left in their court, but I know I have done my job by speaking up."

4. Some coaches choose to remain silent on these issues. While they may not be actively weighing their athletes, what are your thoughts on silence? What are ways you take a proactive approach to helping your athletes develop healthy relationships with food and their bodies?

"Silence about eating issues and weighing athletes are both bad and it's hard to say one is worse than the other. One of my goals as a coach is to prepare my athletes to be successful people after college. For the women, this means that I want them to be healthy, happy, and have the opportunity to be moms. As a coach, I need to set them up for a good life beyond running so they can be healthy overall.

I wouldn't be able to sleep at night if I had an idea that the team culture I was a part of was that of comparisons, not eating, and believing that the only way to run fast was to lose weight. That is not something I want to be a part of. That's a big reason we start off the cross country season with a conversation about body image, eating, and comparisons at our summer camp. I do not want this culture on my team. At this conversation, we often read a "Dear Younger Me" letter written by Lauren Fleshman that encourages young athletes to find a team with a healthy eating culture. That's what we are going for."

5. Do you have any tips for normalizing talk with athletes about food, bodies, periods, etc?

"Be open. It is important to have conversations about it. It may be difficult to have these conversations, it may feel uncomfortable, but overtime your ability to have those conversations will increase. **You don't have to love having those types of conversations, but you will gain the experience to handle them.** If I have a particular conversation that I am puzzled about, I reach out for help from our school's dietitian for guidance on what questions to ask in the conversation.

What I want my athletes to hear from me is that beyond any athletic accomplishment, I want them to go on to lead healthy and happy lives. I don't want anything to jeopardize that. Be aware of the signs of a negative food culture and do your best to stop that.

As a coach, it's important to not think that you know too much. You don't have to. **There are a lot of other experts around you that deal with women's health, eating disorders, distance running, and comparisons. I know a little bit, but not a lot. My job is to help the athletes get the help they need from the experts. Utilize the resources around you.**"

6. How do you address this issue among your male athletes?

"Men are different than the women. Stereotypically, it's not as big of a challenge for the guys as it is for the girls. **For the men, we don't talk in a big group setting, but we do talk to them individually as we notice red flags during the seasons.** Obviously we talk to the girls individually in the same way too, but we just don't do the full team talk with the men because most of them aren't struggling unlike the women's team."