

Introduction for Coaches By Coach Andrew Blanks

(Except from upcoming book "Hurdles Are Fundamental & Fun")

Young hurdlers have to be developed with rhythm and technique. The idea, coaches, is to make sure that each and everything we're doing is both hard work and fun. We'll try to make it easy for you to teach the techniques along that line and to continue to make it fun and work.

The drills, the ideas of how to approach the hurdles and techniques, all should be done with the manifestation of fun and ease so that it is not hard for you to coach or hard for the young learner or those at the intermediate stage that have learned but have not gotten the technique down yet or for those at the top of their class to make their approach not less than hard work. Some of those who have reached the top of the pinnacle may not wish to work as hard as those who are learning. But, if there is a certain amount of fun and competition in the training process it makes even the advanced hurdler work as hard as he did before he became advanced. So in the sense that we approach this with a consistency of effort and fun we make the whole and the end results the maximum of what they should be.

When people first get into hurdling it becomes a system of accomplishment at each step that they do, the happiness and the focus is strong, the desire is very high. But once we get part of it down then the tendency to let up the enthusiasm takes place. We're trying to maintain enthusiasm, maintain the excellence of continuing to learn. Never let them think that they have learned everything, never really hold back but never let them believe they have learned everything. Continue to make it work so they will continue to build on the aspect of becoming not only a good hurdler but a great one at whatever level they are going to reach while doing it.

What makes a good hurdle coach?

First they have to have some idea of the event. Second, believe in the event as an integral part of their program. Third, study hurdling. Study the people who have been good at it ... how they compete, how they handle mistakes, how they run a haphazard race as opposed to running an absolutely fabulous and flawless race.

The hurdle coach should have some running experience in running. He or she should know about balance and technique, how to recognize a kid who is capable of running the hurdles, and then be able to teach them. Many times people try to do too much coaching and not enough teaching. So the absolute good hurdle coach is one who believes in teaching and teaching each phase and stage of the race as well as each stage and phase of the drills and each phase and stage of speed work.

Now in that process you will have youngsters who are good enough and who learn well enough just by doing. That's the difference between the kids who are cognitive and who are kinesthetic. Some learn by doing, some learn by process. But I truly believe that if you teach and you believe in what you're teaching, as much as you might not know, you can become a good hurdle coach because the kids are going to catch on and they're going to perform because good teachers have a certain amount of expectations. Good teaching produces good results because good teachers have high expectations for those they teach. Those who do not teach will merely be average coaches and they'll have average hurdlers.

What do you mean by teach each phase of the hurdles?

Teaching from start to finish. Not going out there and saying, "All you have to do is, baby just get over those hurdles and get to the end of them." And then each day line up the hurdles and do the same thing again, tell them to go over and run through them and do them. You teach the beginning of the hurdle race which is the start to the first hurdle. You teach the middle of the hurdle race which is what happens after your cross the first hurdle through the middle set

of hurdles in the race. You coach what happens from the middle of the hurdles to the finish of the race. Then what happens from the last hurdle to the finish. There are many things that transpire between the time the gun goes off and the time the athlete crosses the finish line. Or in some cases not cross the finish line.

For instance, if a kid gets in a race hits a hurdle and falls it does not mean he didn't run a good race in between... it means that part of his technique was faulty because something didn't clear. Now if it came because another hurdler fell in front of him or kicked the hurdle over in front of him that's still another phase you also have to teach: how to handle things that happen during the race. Not teaching the defensive part of hurdling, which is watching out for kids who throw their arms out, who don't really cross the hurdles properly, who might kick it and try to get the kid to be able to function under adversity as well as ideal circumstance. So that's a portion of teaching every phase.

Some coaches feel that it's not necessary to work completely simply because they get kids over the hurdles and they don't want to go any further with them. If you were going to teach a child to drive the first thing that happens is you go into the classroom, they learn all the rules all the requirements, the hand signals, the signs that they have to read before they ever get behind the wheel. When they get behind the wheel the instructor is sitting right there with them taking them through each aspect: when to turn, how to turn, how wide to turn, what signal to use, etc.. And then when you finish with that they offer what defensive driving courses so you can reduce your insurance policy rate knowing that you've gotten everything done.

Part of teaching hurdles involves the "classroom setting." Whether you do it at the beginning, or in the middle just not at the end. I teach some skills in the gym before we even go outside. We sit and talk and teach technique and go over rules and situations about hurdling. For example, a youngster must know that you can't have a trail leg going outside of the hurdle that you must go over the middle of the hurdle, that you have to stay in the lanes, that the earnest effort rule requires you to make an earnest effort to clear each barrier.

So take your athletes to the classroom and talk to them and show them film and demonstrate. A classroom setting can be any place you desire it to be.

Teaching is teaching. I have felt that over the past 25 years that I have been involved in track and field as a coach that I have never coached but I have always taught and will always try to teach track and field especially the event of hurdling. You're starting with people who have no ability, who have very little skills, who might be gifted athletically, who might be gifted with gymnastic ability, who might be gifted with some basic skills that they don't even know that they have. You may be fortunate to get an athlete who is exceptionally gifted, well coordinated, who can hurdle with both legs, etc. but ninety percent of the rule is you teach and you teach, and you teach.

Frequently Asked Questions

The following are excerpts from "Hurdles Are Fundamental & Fun" by Andrew Blanks

1. How to correct athletes who jump over the hurdles.

One of the most common problems encountered by most hurdle coaches is athletes who jump over the hurdles. They are trying to make sure both legs are clear and don't feel they can run/step over the hurdles in a continuous motion. So they feel that they will run faster by jumping straight up into the air and straight back down on the hurdle and then sprinting in between which actually damages the legs more than hitting the hurdle in the actual hurdle position.

You correct it by teaching them in a slower manner, at a lower height if possible, how to actually step over the hurdle. Use the walk over technique of placing hurdles a certain distance apart and having them walk over them. You can also have them get down into a hurdle stretch

and lean into a complete hurdle position and show them that in this position you can get over the hurdle with only a minimal amount of clearance room. Some young athletes believe that they have to have a great deal of room between them and the hurdle in order to clear it. This is not true.

2. What is the correct position of trail leg and foot on approaching the hurdle.

If the trail leg or the toe is down ninety percent of the time the hurdler is going to hook the hurdle and hit it, catching the foot on the hurdle and sometimes falling over or pulling the hurdle completely over and having it pop up into the air. But if they place the leg in the proper position where the toe is up and to the side and not straight down then clearing the hurdle is no problem and you can do this without having to jump up into the air.

3. What are correct arm motions.

Most inexperienced hurdlers feel that if they throw both arms up into the air like a bird that it is going to help lift them up over the hurdle. So they throw both arms up and try to come over the hurdle and then get back into running position which just slows them down, cause problems and sometimes even injury. This might help in the long jump but it won't help hurdling.

Correcting this becomes relatively easy. First you teach them to walk properly. Right arm, left leg, left arm right leg. Show them how to move in a steady, rhythmic movement. Then as they are walking teach them to swing the arm in the proper position and proper technique of folding the lead arm in a 45 degree angle, back, pulling it forward under the chin, bringing it back, pulling it forward under the chin. At the same time swinging the trail leg arm completely toward the back and then raising it forward just past the ear. Swinging it and raising it. **We use to say, "Open the door, close the door, open the door, close the door."** Have them walk rhythmically, teaching them rhythm. This is part of the mechanics of going over the hurdles and running between them. Hurdling is running a rhythmic race.

4. How to come down off the hurdle

Coming down hard, stomping the ground does not help at all. You have to teach them that certain parts of the foot are the only parts that should come down. Not the heel or the middle part of the **foot but coming down lightly on the ball of the foot so that you can continue to run.** And they do not have to be 50 feet over the hurdle in order to run! Some people feel that when they come across in the hurdle position they have to go so far between or so far over the hurdle that when they come down instead of being three steps from the next one they're almost two. Now they're running into the hurdle and feeling like they're getting too close.

5. Why control is important.

Control prevents the jumping, control prevents the swinging, control also prevents the head bobbing- trying to throw the head in order to help you push over the hurdle when it is going to follow anyway. Because the upper part of the body is basically balanced in a leaning position the athlete will start going in one direction anyway. So while they're going in that direction all they have to do is then control the movements as they go in that direction and everything then begins to follow suit.

6. The hurdler who floats the hurdles

The floater! This is the hurdler you have to work with on "quick feet." **Getting him to get the foot back on the ground as quickly as possibly without forcing it there.** A floater is going to be higher over the hurdles than the regular quick hurdler because he is trying to clear. The reason for floating is "making sure that I clear the hurdle." Rather than clearing the hurdle - making --sure-- that-- I --clear-- the --hurdle which is a floating and long gliding action. He is a gazelle and an antelope rather than a road runner. You have to combine the road runner and the gazelle. **You want the take-off of the gazelle but you want the quickness of the roadrunner** all in one beautiful, well calculated rhythmic motion.

DRILLS

The coaches job is to try to explain what the runner is doing wrong and why he may be doing it. It is important that the athlete understand this and learn how to correct the problem. Practicing with a group increases the fun of a workout and gives the athletes a chance to watch each other make mistakes and correct them. If one runner is doing something very well, he can provide an example of how to get it right. This can give the runner a well deserved feeling of accomplishment and a sense of pride in what he is learning. This athlete can demonstrate to the others how to master the skill correctly.

The purpose of these drills is to help develop the athlete's hurdling technique. Some of the drills may also be included in the more experienced athlete's warm up program for training and competition.

Beginner Drills

Walking Hurdle Drill

Three or four hurdles are placed ten meters apart on the grass and set at the 30 inch height. As the athlete approaches the hurdle, he steps past it with his lead leg; a spot off to the side a few inches. His lead foot should be planted about a foot beyond the hurdle.

He now leans forward, putting his weight on his lead foot. At the same instant, he pulls his trail leg over the hurdle and pops it forward. The coach should observe that the runner's trail leg comes down well in front of his lead foot, which has not moved. In doing this drill, the beginner learns that if he leans forward over a hurdle, his trail leg will pull through and clear the hurdle naturally.

Air Step Drill

After getting the hang of the walking drill, the athlete should try it at a jog. He wants to get his lead foot off the ground by practicing the air step. As he jogs toward the hurdle, he places his lead foot to the side and bounds as if leaping over a barrier. He should make sure he bounds up and forward about a foot in the air. While in the air, he must elevate his trail knee and point his trailing foot outward. He keeps his lead foot in the air when he leans forward and pulls his trail leg over the hurdle. As he bounds up and leans forward, he will find that his trail leg pops over the hurdle naturally. You want to keep the hips level.

When the air drill is perfected, the runner is ready to go over the actual hurdles. Once he becomes proficient at doing the air step and understands the feeling of driving up, the coach can have his runner go into the full hurdle.

Half Hurdle Drill

Most athletes can jump over the obstacle, but they do not have the first idea how to bring their trail leg through behind them.

Line up each athlete and have them, one by one, walk over the hurdle. The lead leg has to be beyond the barrier in order for the center of gravity to be in the proper position. In this position, the runner gets the feeling of just gliding through, not falling or getting out of balance.

Once the athlete has mastered this technique, he should begin to take the air step, which is difficult. Once this technique is mastered, and the athlete has the body memory of driving up with the trail leg following through, he is ready to go over a full hurdle, approaching it directly with both his lead and trail legs. It is important that a coach not allow his athletes to practice over a hurdle before they have mastered the half-hurdle drill.

The coach can walk his athletes through this drill five or six times to get the feeling of placing the lead leg beyond the hurdle, leaning and then pulling the trail leg through.

Trail Leg Drill With Chair

For this drill you need to stand and hold on to something, like a chair. No hurdles are needed! You bring your trail leg back, up, and around like you would do if you were going over the hurdle. I recommend three sets of ten for both legs. This helps not only your form, but helps you alternate legs. Pictures to illustrate this are at the bottom of the page.

Trail Leg Snap

Set one hurdle out. Put your lead leg over the hurdle and let it touch the ground. Now lean over like you are in the middle of jumping the hurdle and snap your trail leg around over the hurdle. Do this until you feel comfortable. This is an important drill and very good to do daily, or whenever you have access to hurdles.

One Step Drill

Set out 3 or 4 hurdles only a couple of feet apart, so that you can only take one step in between them while running them semi-fast. It is just a good drill to get your technique down and to learn to snap your lead and trail leg down. You have to do that so you can get over the next hurdle.

300/400 Hurdle drill

This drill is for 300 or 400 hurdlers. Set up the last 3 or 4 hurdles in the 300 or 400 race. Start off on your mark, do an all out 3 or 400 and then with what ever energy you have left go over the last 4 hurdles. You tend to run faster when the hurdles aren't there so you'll use up more energy before you get to the last 4. Practicing this will help you have more energy left over.

The Northwest Gauntlet

Set up two lanes of hurdles (I'd say about 4 or 5 in each lane. Line them up about a couple feet apart. make sure one lane is facing the other way. Height is important in this drill because when you get tired you might not make it over tall hurdles. Set the hurdles in lane 1 to a height that you can JUMP over and in lane 2 set them at your regular 110 or 100 setting. Your 1st move will be to JUMP over the hurdles in lane one. Bring both feet together and hop over them, when doing this make sure you bring your knees up to your chest so you'll have a better chance of making it over. If you set the hurdles up right you'll notice that once you've completed the first lane you can just turn around and start the next lane. For this lane you'll be doing your trail leg drills by the side of the hurdle. Jog by the hurdle and practice snapping your trail leg over each hurdle. Do each lane about 4 times and then break then do another set of 4. Its MUCH harder than it sounds.

Jets

What is involved is setting two or more hurdles far enough apart that the runner has to stretch to get one step in between hurdles. The runner then does a standard trail leg drill, "at speed" between the hurdles. The end result should be an improved trail leg, a good lead leg snap and improved arm position over the hurdle.

Landing Drill for acceleration

Set up hurdles, run next to them sprinting between them, but taking a double step when you reach a hurdle. This will improve your landing, so you can accelerate faster

Lead Leg Drill #1 Set up 5 to 6 hurdles and set the hurdle height lower than race height; so ladies 30" and men 33" - 39" (height will increase the better you get). Practice snapping your lead leg over the hurdle and back down to the ground.

Lead Leg Drill #2 Set up 5 to 6 hurdles 6 to 8 feet apart (distance will change pending on the person). Set the hurdle height lower than race height; so ladies 30" and men 33" - 39"

(height will increase the better you get). Practice snapping your lead leg over the hurdle and back down to the ground, but this time try to take three small steps before you reach the next hurdle.

Lead Leg Drill #3 Set out 5 hurdles about 1 foot apart. Start at one end and kick your leg above the hurdle, alternating legs. If you are doing it right, you will move down the line of hurdles. When you reach the other end, turn around and come back. Do three rotations.

Lead Leg Drill #4 Here is one drill that works on just bring up the lead leg quickly. First stand 2 to 3 feet from a strong wall. Bring your leg up to hit the wall as you would be going over the hurdle. Also, do the arm action too while you do this workout.

Stride Pattern Drill

Set up 6-10 cones, so that the athlete can take 7-8 strides to the first cone and then three strides between each. Focus on an uninterrupted sprint with 7 strides to the first cone followed by a 3 stride pattern between the cones. Make a note of the distances between the cones for future sessions.

Hurdle Walking Drill

The athlete performs the full hurdling skill at a walking pace over six or eight low hurdles set at approx. one meter spacing.

- Stand approx. half a meter from the first hurdle
- Pick the lead knee up very high
- Place the lead leg vertically down on the other side of the hurdle. The lower part of the leg should not reach out in front of the body.
- Bring the knee of the trail leg out to the side to above hip height with the foot cocked to clear the hurdle
- Bring the trail knee across the hurdle
- As the trail knee clears the hurdle bring the knee up and to the front centre of the body
- Place the trail leg vertically down on the other side of the hurdle. The lower part of the leg should not reach out in front of the body.
- Repeat the action with the new trail leg
- Keep the hips high throughout the action.
- Good range of arm movement.

Continuous Trail Leg Isolation Drill (quality of execution is more important than speed). Use six to eight hurdles set initially at a lower than normal race height. The drill can be done using three strides or one stride between close spaced hurdles. The athlete first performs the exercise by walking down the side of the flight of hurdles taking only the trailing leg over the hurdle. The lead leg must go past the line of the hurdle before the trail leg is used. Once the drill has been mastered at a walking pace it can then be conducted at a faster pace by skipping with the lead leg and clearing the hurdle with the trail leg. This can be done on every skip or every third skip. The hips are kept high throughout and the eyes should look ahead at the next hurdle. There should be a good range of arm movement, with the opposite arm leading the action.

Lead Leg Isolation Drill

This particular exercise is designed to work only the leading leg. Use six to eight hurdles set initially at a lower than normal race height. The drill can be done using three strides between close spaced hurdles. This drill is performed along side the hurdle and should be conducted at a jogging pace.

The athlete attacks the hurdle in the normal way but only takes the lead leg across it. The trailing leg trails alongside the hurdle.

There should be a good range of arm movement, with the opposite arm leading the action.

The hips are kept high throughout and the eyes should look ahead at the next hurdle. Quality of execution is more important than the speed it is conducted at.

Speed Training Drills

The following drills can be used to improve the various aspects of hurdling speed.

- Reduce the distance between the hurdles. This will work particularly on leg speed between the hurdles and will also simulate the effects of a tail wind. The normal pattern of three strides between the hurdles should be maintained.
- Increase the approach to the first hurdle. Instead of using the usual 7 or 8 stride approach this should be extended to 12 or 13 strides.
- Increase the distance between the hurdles and increase the number of strides between the hurdles. Spacing should allow 5 or 7 fast strides. The actual spacing will have to be worked out for each individual athlete. This type of work ensures that the athlete is moving faster at the hurdle than normal.
- Lower the hurdles. This enables the athlete to work on the rhythm between the hurdles and on leg speed.
- Remove hurdle 5 or 6 from the full set of 10. The athlete will use a normal stride pattern up to the gap, 7 strides in the gap and a fast normal pattern for the rest of the run. This enables the athlete to simulate the leg speed and clearance speed of the final four or five hurdles.
- Increase the number of hurdles. Sprint hurdlers should occasionally train over 11 or even 12 hurdles at normal spacing.

Wall Attacks

While standing in front of a barrier such as a wall of fence, snap the lead leg out and drive the foot into the barrier.

Anisimova Drills

While standing beside a hurdle and facing the hurdle, move the lead foot/leg back and forth over the hurdle. Concentrate on standing tall, keeping the stomach and butt tight and the lead foot dorsiflexed.

Karate Kid Kicks

Start by learning to hop while extending and holding the lead leg in the hurdling position. Once this is mastered, hop, kick/extend the lead leg and step over the hurdle.

Knee slaps

Do a slow jog and hold the hands at chest height in the open palms down position. While in this position, drive the lead knee up and slap it with the open hand. Then do it on a 1-2 count with both knees. Once this action has been learned, do it with a slight lean and with the feet dorsiflexed. Then progress to where the action can be accomplished when going over a hurdle.

References:

Hurdling: Tricks of the Trade

<http://www.members.tripod.com/~sublife/drill.html>

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