



Coaches shape more than skills—they build confidence, discipline, and belief. Through patience and guidance, they help others discover what they're capable of. In this issue, you'll hear from two coaches at very different points in their coaching lives—one with 40 years experience, and one in their first year.



Coach Mike Urbanski

Aging as a Runner – Tips for Dealing with the Inevitable

by Mike Urbanski

Getting older, getting slower, but still hanging in there.

When I was 36 years old, I ran my marathon PR of 2:32, and aging as a runner was far from my mind. Now, forty-one years later, even though I have never stopped training and racing, breaking 4 hours is an accomplishment.

The Realities of Aging as a Runner: Acknowledgment, Acceptance, Action

When I started coaching high school distance runners forty years ago, my fastest athletes could not keep up with me. When I retired from coaching
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Eight Lessons Learned Coaching My First Season of High School Cross Country

by Sam Horning

When the school I work at posted a job listing for a cross country (XC) coach, I thought to myself: "I can do that!" I ran cross country my freshman year of high school and was relatively fast with a 5K time of 18:00. I ran throughout my adolescence and young adulthood for my own health and fitness.

I stopped running competitively because I found a fascination for the art of movement and became a professional contemporary dancer, choreographer, and performer. My dance career consisted of very
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Coach Sam Horning

Aging as a Runner cont.

high school last year, I couldn't keep up with my slowest runners. (I finally bought a bike!)

The slow but steady decline in my speed and strength, particularly when I reached my 50s, was hard to swallow. As a coach, I knew the science and what happens to the body as we age. Intellectually, I understood what was happening. The emotional and psychological effects were a whole other story.

It's taken me a long time to come to terms with becoming an older runner. Now having weathered it, I can pass along a few tips to runners who are past their PR time of life. (Of course, if you just started running as a 50- or 60-year-old, you probably have some PRs ahead of you, but your experience will eventually be the same as those of us who have been running since our teen or young adult years.)

Tips for Dealing with the Psychological and Emotional Impacts of the Decline

- **The self-talk mantra.** "There aren't too many 77-year-olds out here today working as hard as I am."
- **Appreciating the good feelings.** Consciously acknowledge how good it feels after that first mile, as the body warms up and any aches and pains go away.
- **Racing.** Stoking the ever-present competitive fires and working to place in my age group helps me maintain motivation even as I slow down. And then celebrating if my time in this year's race was not much slower than last year's.
- **Encouraging other runners when training or racing.** When I am doing a tempo or fartlek workout – working pretty hard – and someone blows by me, sometimes I'd like to say "I used to be able to kick your butt" but I end up saying "Looking strong!" Just like

expressing gratitude makes you feel better, telling another runner that he/she is looking good raises your spirit.

- **Relishing the satisfaction that comes from doing something hard.** Finishing a race or a workout, I am still flooded with the same feelings of total exhaustion and accomplishment that I had 60 years ago. Those feelings never change, even as an aging runner, and being aware of them is always a mental boost.

Of course, the psychological stress of aging is a result of the physiological changes that occur in our bodies.

Physiological Changes Impacting Aging as a Runner

It's common knowledge what happens as we get older (these are just a handful of the most noticeable changes):

- **Declining "aerobic horsepower."** VO2max declines about 10 percent per decade after age 30. Our maximum heart rate begins to drop about one beat per minute each year.
- **Aging muscles** become less adept at using oxygen.
- **Loss of muscle mass and strength** begins happening around the age of 40, speeding up particularly after 65. Fast twitch muscles seem to deteriorate faster than slow twitch.
- We begin to **lose some flexibility** and experience a loss of range of motion. When muscles are tight, we limit our power base and running efficiency.

Tips for Slowing Down the Effects of Aging as a Runner

So, can we slow down this inevitable process? Definitely. Here are some well-researched ways to do that:

Aging as a Runner cont.

- To slow down the VO2max decline, do at least **one fast workout a week**. Train hard at your 2 mile or 5K race pace. Try to get your heart rate up to 90% of its maximum.
- **Race more!** Young, competitive athletes usually need to race less, but aging runners get more benefit from racing at shorter distances more frequently. Shorter races are great opportunities to get in your higher intensity running, helping preserve your fast twitch muscle fibers and muscle efficiency. The “use it or lose it” paradigm applies here.
- **Strength training** is critical. Lift weights or do a regimen of body weight exercises at least twice a week. This is essential to mitigate the age-related loss in muscle mass and strength. Mix in some high intensity workouts that elevate your heart rate and challenge your cardiovascular system.
- **Stretch!** Do yoga, balance exercises, and use a foam roller every day to work your lower body in particular.
- **Run less!** I thought I would never say this, but add some cross training a couple of times a week. As well as recovering from your runs, this gives you a great opportunity to work different muscles. My training plan currently includes running, cycling, strength training, yoga, and a stair stepper. (I obviously do more than one type of workout on some days.) This cross training has made me stronger, faster, and more recovered for my runs.
- **Recover more!** Remember, often “less is more,” especially when it comes to mileage for an aging runner. Adequate recovery is critical. Some smart watches can monitor your workout intensity and let you know when to back off if you’re like me and sometimes still think that “more is better.”

Final Thoughts

We can’t hold off the aging process and the inevitable changes in our bodies, but we can slow it down and stay in great shape – both physically and mentally – if we are smart and consistent with our training. Aging gracefully as a runner just takes some acceptance, adjustment, and perseverance. 🏃



Three generations of Urbanski men after running a Turkey Trot together. Proof that aging as a runner doesn't mean no racing!

Run The Numbers

SAR Membership:

As of January 14th, 2026:

Number of Members	1141
Number of Memberships	754

Children’s Fitness Fund:

In 2025, Children’s Fitness Fund grants totaling \$8,279 were awarded to the following organizations:

Beyond
Catholic Community Services of S. AZ.
Khalsa Montessori School
Kiwanis de Amigos
Orange Grove Middle School XC
Rich River Athletics Club
Senita Valley PTSA-GROW
Tucson Hebrew Academy
Vail School District

Eight Lessons Learned cont.

rigorous and stylized training in endurance, strength, flexibility, balance, and commitment.

In regard to the XC job posting, I thought:

“Basically, I’ll need to organize the daily logistics, make sure the athletes are safe and hydrated with good nutrition, and provide skills for improving running technique through strength, mobility, endurance, and speed.”

I was successful in convincing one of the previous coaches, Jerry Frey, to mentor me in my first season and to co-coach alongside me with an agreement that I take on the communication for the team. Frey is an expert coach with many years of experience in both XC and track and field. He skillfully guided my development as a coach in ways that allowed me to understand my own philosophy of coaching the sport as well as the realities of managing a team. Although we have different styles, his mentorship really helped put into perspective the requirements and demands on high school coaches as well as many coaching strategies.

While I gave a solid effort my first season co-coaching 42 student-athletes, I left my first season feeling like a mediocre coach at best and reflecting on the many lessons learned. Here are eight key lessons from my first season coaching high school cross country:

1) Lower the emphasis on time and pacing for the first half of the season! Instead, focus on personal improvement each practice.

Coaches can review records and logs of race times from their own athletes and other schools to figure out what’s required to outpace the competition. After all, it is a competitive sport! However, I learned that talking with student-athletes about their timing and pacing too early

in the season is stress inducing and can leave students feeling pressure to perform and achieve beyond what is attainable. It also places too much value on moving quickly and for the purpose of beating the clock. Rather, it’s important to place value on moving at a responsive pace to the athletes’ own physical fitness and mental fortitude.

2) Be unwavering in difficult decisions!

I made a difficult decision to bring only upperclassmen to an event known as Desert Twilight based on financial and travel restrictions. At this time early in the season, I didn’t have a clear picture of running times and wasn’t able to make an impartial decision based only on time. For this reason, I wanted to set a precedent of bringing only upperclassmen even if they weren’t our fastest runners. In this way, I considered Desert Twilight as being an event that underclassmen could look forward to in their later seasons.

This decision was met with many strong opinions from the team, some who felt that the decision didn’t take into consideration the effort from freshman runners and that some upperclassmen were undeserving to attend. Some harsh words were said. While listening to their concerns, which were at times disrespectful to one another, the runners saw me temporarily waver in my decision which caused some athletes to doubt my leadership. Truthfully, I did doubt my own decision. Although I ended up standing by my original decision, the momentary waver was difficult to overcome and to regain their trust. Lesson learned: make a decision and stick with it! Don’t waver! It ended up being that my decision was a strong one which really pushed a few upperclassmen to be competitive in other aspects of their lives.

Eight Lessons Learned cont.

3) Learn from the perspectives and experiences of other coaches!

Have plenty of conversations with other coaches about strategies and the conditions of the sport. Realize that although your focus is on one particular team, the broader goal of the sport is to improve the health and wellness of student-athletes in the region and to encourage participation and perseverance.

4) Plan for how to manage distance runs with only one coach!

Going for a distance run means having an awareness of where all runners are within a 1–3 mile radius, sometimes on busy roads. It is stressful when some runners are almost 3 miles away from the school and a runner, for example, who has a stomach ache, is staying on campus with another peer. I rode a bike for these long runs, often circling between sight-lines of runners and constantly keeping track of the location of each person.

5) Have many different cheers and motivators to say to runners!

I started off the season trying to motivate runners during practice by exclaiming: “Good work!” or “You’re doing great!” or “Keep going and keep your focus ahead!” I started to notice that some student-athletes would give me a look of frustration when they heard me say anything like this. Over time, I realized that when I got to understand each runner as a person with their own idiosyncrasies, I was better able to say what I thought would motivate them at the proper time and the right place. Sometimes, it’s also better to say nothing and let a runner self-motivate!

6) Be ready to have conversations about social differences!

High schoolers are curious and constantly learning about the world, their environment, the systems around them, and each other. When students from various families, backgrounds, and cultures come together through a sport, there will be moments of social collision. It’s important for a coach to intervene at times and to guide students toward increased awareness and acceptance of each person and the diversity each person brings to the team.



Coach Sam Horning, members of the Tanque Verde cross country team, and coach Jerry Frey

7) Recognize that many athletes run XC as conditioning for another sport; however, that doesn’t change the integrity of XC!

Although it is frustrating as an XC coach, it’s important to realize that many athletes run cross country as conditioning for another sport which is their central interest. For this reason, many student-athletes and their families will make decisions that prioritize the other sport rather

Eight Lessons Learned cont.

than cross country. Be sure to have open conversations with student-athletes early in the season about their goals through XC. Plan for athletes who are enrolled in multiple sports to be sure they aren't overtraining.

8) Be ready to make decisions about the weather quickly!

Practice and meets are cancelled based on the UV index, heat index, and lightning strikes (any strikes within 10 miles over a 30-minute period). The logistics of cancelling practice can be burdensome on parents and student-athletes, so it's important to make very timely decisions. I once cancelled a practice, and then the storm passed. I once held practice, and we ended up needing to share the gymnasium with the footballers (which was a whole other learning experience, too!).

Are you a high school cross country coach and can relate to what I've said? Or perhaps you have some insight, stories, or experiences you think I should hear? Feel free to contact me at: shorning@tanq.org.



Who Loves Free Races?



It's SAR's 50th birthday! What better way to celebrate than with a free race for everyone. Join us for the 5K Spring Cross Country Classic at Lincoln Regional Park. No shirts, no medals—just pure cross country fun. Sign up today!

The 2026 TMC Arizona Distance Classic - Sign Up Today!

The second edition of the TMC Arizona Distance Classic is just around the corner. This year's race takes place on March 8th, 2026 in scenic Oro Valley.

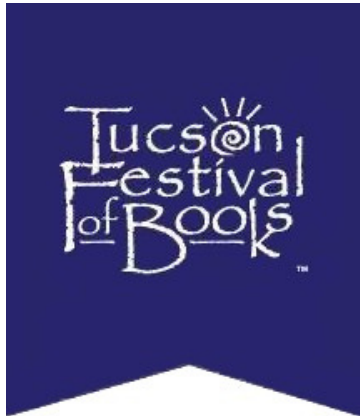
Don't forget, SAR members receive a discount that covers RunSignup fees at all SAR-owned races.

More race details are available at <https://arizonadistanceclassic.com>.



The half marathon lead pack running hard while enjoying the scenic vistas at the 2025 TMC Arizona Distance Classic
Photo by John Harris Media

Tucson Festival of Books



The 2026 Tucson Festival of Books will be held on Saturday and Sunday, March 14th and 15th, on the University of Arizona campus. Over 130,000 festival-goers are expected to attend the two-day event.

The Southern Arizona Roadrunners will host a booth in the Science of Everyday Life Neighborhood.

In keeping with our club's mission, activities at our booth are designed to encourage Science City visitors to build healthy habits for life by exploring movement and fitness, including running and walking.

If you are interested in volunteering at our booth or helping with event planning, please email newsletter@runsar.org.

If you are planning to attend this year's Tucson Festival of Books, be sure to stop by our booth and say hello.



Exercise Your Mind

Can you solve this Crypto-Quote? This word puzzle uses a substitution cipher. Each letter is replaced by another letter consistently throughout the puzzle. Look for common letters and word patterns. Solution is by trial and error. The solution can be found on page 8.

C BVJUVSCD JPJPBHNI INKVLVDS VD C QVDNSCI-HCKNL HIVDN

JEBFANMNL C UCAO BCICMUED VD EIE QCAANW CDL VK DER INONIINL

ME CK MUN CIVXEDC LVKMCDJN QACKVJ.

Clue: S=G

Crypto-Quote Answer:

TO AS THE ARIZONA DISTANCE CLASSIC.

A MICHIGAN CUCUMBER RESIDING IN A VINEGAR-BASED BRINE COMPLETED A HALF MARATHON IN ORO VALLEY AND IS NOW REFERRED

2026 SAR RACE SCHEDULE

- January 11th: Beyond Saguaro National Park 4 Mile Run
- January 18th: Sun Run: La Primera 5K/10K Roadrace + FitKidz Mile
- February 14th: Fine Valentine Relay 4 Mile & 2 Mile + FitKidz Mile
- February 22nd: TMC Old Tucson Trail Run 8 Mile, 4 Mile & 1 Mile
- March 8th: TMC Arizona Distance Classic Half Marathon, 6.55 Mile & 5K
- March 15th: Desert Leprechaun 5K & 1 Mile Run/Walk
- March 22th: Spring Cross Country Classic 5K + FitKidz Mile
- April 11th: Sabino Canyon Sunset Run 7.4 Mile & 2 Mile Fun Run/Walk
- May 3rd: Dr. Gann's Diet of Hope Cinco de Mayo 10K & 5K + FitKidz Mile
- May 17th: Tucson 5000 + FitKidz Mile
- May 30th: TMC Meet Me Downtown 5K Night Run & Mile Festival + FitKidz Mile
- September 7th: TMC Saguaro National Park Labor Day 8 Mile & 5K Run/Walk
- September 13th: TMC Tucson 10K & 5K
- September 26th: Sabino Canyon One Mile FitKidz Classic
- TBD: Jim Click's Run 'n' Roll 5K & 1 Mile
- October 18th: TMC A-Mountain Half Marathon & Cigna 4-Miler + FitKidz Mile
- November 1st: Dave's Run for ALS 8K & 5K + FitKidz Mile
- November 26th: Thanksgiving XC Classic 5K & 1.5 Mile Fun Run/Walk

About SAR

The Southern Arizona Roadrunners is a not-for-profit organization dedicated to promoting health and fitness in Tucson and Southern Arizona through running and walking.

Our vision is to strengthen and support the running and walking community in Southern Arizona through high-quality, affordable, and family-friendly events and programming that empower people of all backgrounds, abilities, and ages to pursue a healthier lifestyle. We promote community engagement by celebrating the joy of athletic achievement, individual and group participation, philanthropy, and volunteer service.



For the latest information, visit us online at runsar.org
You can also follow us on Facebook and Instagram at:
[@azroadrunners](https://www.facebook.com/azroadrunners) & [@runsar](https://www.instagram.com/runsar)

If you would prefer not to receive future issues of The Roadrunner, please contact us at: info@runsar.org or (520) 812-0159