

# HOW TO PICK A GOOD SPRINT COACH?

By Eric Dixon

## To Get Speed You Have To Practice Speed!

Of course, this requires many factors involving the athlete and the coach. How do you get faster? Let's start with the fundamentals of finding a good Sprint Coach, preferably a Masters Sprint coach because yes, there is a difference.

A coach will help you focus on the goals you want to attain and achieve the results you want. They will help you, get organized, hone your skills, and keep you committed so that you can succeed. But are all coaches the same? No way! So, how do you tell the difference between a phenomenal coach, a good coach or a mediocre one?

One of the main factors in looking for a good sprint coach is, obviously, their experience. I have had many an athlete, young and old, come to me after spending years with a distance coach who says they can coach the sprints only to find out that the coach really didn't know their event(s). The sprints events are the 60m to the 800m. (Yes, the 800m has become a sprint event. Although, some coaches will say it always was a sprint event. The 800m is an anaerobic energy system, a Special Endurance II event. If run properly, you use only about 10% of your aerobic capacity.) Your chances of getting an experienced sprint coach will greatly improve if the coach is a sprinter too. Also your chances are better, if he/she is a Masters competitor or if he/she has coached or is coaching Master Sprinters. I know it's hard to find good sprint coaches, but in the long run it's better for your long-term health if you do your homework.

Here are some important factors when selecting a sprint coach. Take the time to look for someone who knows your event(s). Find out who they've worked with by asking for a resume and references. Find out with whom you will be training. (Personally, I'll sometimes mix my masters and youths together, but they will do different workouts. "Individualization" (more on this later) is the key. Even if I had two sprinters that ran the exact same times in competition, I would not train the same way. Furthermore, I would not work a second year athlete the same as I would a four or six year athlete. Yes, I track training ages too.) A great coach will have a basic knowledge of a Multi-System Training Philosophy. This knowledge base would include the following: Musculoskeletal System, Energy System, Neuromuscular System, Neuroendocrine System, and the Proprioceptive System which is all part of the Physiology aspect of training. They should also have some knowledge of Psychology which is used in motivation and effective communication. They must also utilize an efficient, systemized Training Philosophy as oppose to "winging it" at practice. Not to mention the technical aspect of sprinting like "Block Work" and how to run the turns and the

mechanical aspect of sprinting (i.e. form). Of course, I could spend a lot of time going over each of these factors but not today.

To help you get an understanding of what a good/great sprint coach will have to offer in their arsenal of coaching skills making your masters sprinting adventures healthier and more successful, I have listed some important factors to consider. They should include the following:

A good Masters coach will have experience. Does he or she know how to handle a broad range of clients and issues? A good coach will recognize that you are an amateur and that you are also an adult. Most masters are in the sport for the sheer joy of it and not to make money or become professionals. Some of us have other commitments like families, jobs etc...therefore our time can be limited or it can be virtually limitless. The coach will have to be able to adjust to your time commitment and provide a training program that's compatible to your needs.

A good Masters coach will possess the ability to foster a good coach-athlete relationship. This relationship has to be firmly based on trust if it is to work. The coach will become your training partner, your friend, your ally, and your mentor. This is how it should be. However, you, the athlete must believe that the coach is looking out for your best interests, but it is your responsibility to ensure you have the right person for the job.

A good Masters coach will work with you to identify both short-term as well as long-term strategic goals; he or she should want to know your goals upfront. They will work with you to set-up a training plan (Periodization Table) to achieve these goals. They will also explain how the two of you will realize these goals. And they should have a system of checks and balances to ensure you're sticking to the time table the two of you established in the beginning. If not, the coach should be able to make changes in the program to correct it and be able to explain to you what's going on and why.

A good Masters coach is an effective communicator in all circumstances. Even under the worst of circumstances, he or she should be able to communicate what you need to do, and how you need to do it. They should be able to articulate what you need to know in a clear fashion without screaming at you. Just because the coach was a great sprinter "Back in the day. . ." does not mean they are a good coach. Some athletes have the ability to perform, but do not possess the ability to teach or the ability to articulate a process properly. Does the coach ask questions to help identify what's really hindering your success or does he/she just stick to surface issues and tell you the same thing over and over like "Get your legs up"? There may be a specific reason you're not or can't get your legs up. It could be weak core or hip-flexors or a number of other reasons (see #9).

A good Masters coach will be able to demonstrate the drills to ensure you know how to perform them

properly. They themselves should be good athletes and look the part. They should be able to set an example of what an athlete should look like. I have seen way too many coaches who are totally out of shape yet trying to convey nutritional values and how important it is to do weight training. I myself will run with my athletes sometimes giving them instructions on form while we are sprinting. I'm not expecting all coaches to be able to do that but again they should be able to at least perform the drills and hopefully, compete as well.

A good Masters coach knows how to modify and individualize your program to meet your age and life style. They need to know the difference between training a young adult versus a master sprinter. They should know that there is a major difference in training volume, nutritional values, recovery system, weight bearing exercises, etc. They should be able to give you a nutritional program that fits your lifestyle and requirements such as calcium. As masters athletes we need a higher calcium intake as we age and train. The more we train the more "milk", yes, I said milk, we need. Our muscles are still strong and getting stronger thus they are pulling on our bones. In addition, as we train the more stress and pounding we are putting on our bones. All of this can place a heavy toll on our body. We need to be pro-active as opposed to reactive to prevent injuries. Of course, there are many other additional nutritional factors that need to be considered.

A good Masters coach will try to give everyone equal time and will be accessible to all athletes. A friend of mine trains with semi-pro and professional runners. She always feels left out because the coach does not give her any attention. His main focus is on the money makers. She is the only masters runner he has. It is imperative that the coach and athlete try to bring in others who are like-minded and within the same age category and training level. This will allow the coach to set up another practice session for masters training. Also, training together with other master sprinters will help the athletes push each other in practice. And the coach will get a little more money, a win-win scenario for everyone.

A good Masters coach will make the time to support you at your events. Having your coach at your event can mean the difference between winning and losing. They'll keep an eye on you during your warm-ups and may give you some last minute pointers. Of course, most of this will be discussed during practice. They will congratulate you on your wins, but continue to encourage you on to the next goal.

A good Masters coach will recognize your strengths and weaknesses. He/she should be able to explain why you're having difficulty performing a drill or exercise and should be able to tell you how to build up your weak point(s). They should be able to tell you what the problem is, what's causing it, and what affect/effect it will

have on your body. To prevent injuries they should provide testing to see what needs to be worked on before you advance into more strenuous training. Sometimes they will need to play detective. Many times I have found out that my athletes think they need more training during competition season which can lead to over training or the wrong type of training (Reversibility).

A good Masters coach will have their "Coach's Philosophy" posted on their website or readily available to ensure they are following it. Because, we all need to be reminded as to why we do what we do.

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## ***SPRINT COACH***

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A good Masters coach will stay updated on the latest information. The more we learn about the human body the more things change. A coach who is training the same way they did two years ago is not doing their job to stay current. They should be on a quest of constant learning and have a good knowledge base of the human body and how it applies to sprinting. One of the areas that I see neglected in training is the Central

Nervous System (CNS). The CNS plays a very important part in sprinting and should be trained as well and trained properly. Even in the warm-up drills if you're doing the wrong type or not correctly you're giving the CNS the wrong signals. If you're doing the wrong type of weight training your giving the CNS the wrong signals as well as the muscles, this process is called "Reversibility". Sprinting is a science and as Hippocrates said: "Thinking that you know is one thing, knowing is quite another. Thinking that you know is ignorance knowing is science."

If you are considering hiring a Sprint coach take your time and be selective. Just because you have spoken with one that "sounds good," does not mean that he/she is a perfect match for you. Talk to a few coaches before making your decision. Remember, the relationship between you and your coach can be an incredible experience once you make the right choice-- it can last a lifetime!

### **\* Individualization:**

One of the biggest misconceptions for coaches and athletes is that there is some universal training method that applies to everyone. Sorry, there isn't! Everyone is different--their speed, strength, and abilities are unique. Therefore, every training program should also be unique

based on the individual's needs. What's needed is a training method that's individualized based upon the athlete's specific abilities. In order to see consistent and continuous improvement you must have an organized training program and use it to track your progress (historical data). Last, you must know where you want to go (a goal or destination). For most athletes the overriding principle is the "End Result", so we want to see effective coaching help achieve success in the highest and healthiest way possible for each individual athlete.

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