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RUNNING

Campbell helping younger runners develop skills

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With all the coverage of the growing problem of obesity in this country (pun intended), especially among children, it seems clear that a lifestyle of fast food, too many snacks, sitting idly in front of the TV set and playing computer games isn't the best choice for youngsters.

Ben Campbell of Colonia is trying to do something to change that.

A former high school and college runner, Campbell coaches the Crimson Knights Youth Cross Country running team, a group of about 50 boys and girls in grades 1 to 8 who will begin their 2005 season of training and racing next week.

"I'm a big believer in keeping the kids away from the TV and the Oreos," Campbell said. "The organized soccer, football and softball leagues are fine, but this is yet another alternative for kids. Its another selection the kids can make, not to mention a sport they can carry over for the rest of their lives," he added.

Campbell, now 45 and "happy" when he runs about 19 minutes for a 5K, said he quit running to concentrate on his studies in college and then to build his career. He started again just before he got married. "Then I was in and out of (running) retirement."

He got involved with the Crimson Knights when his daughters, Theresa, now 17, and Elizabeth, 15, attended St. James Elementary School, where members of the Knights of Columbus had formed the team for the kids about 15 years ago.

"Through attrition, I ended up taking it over," Campbell said, and even though his daughters are long gone from the school, now successfully racing for Mt. St. Mary's Academy in Scotch Plains, he continues as coach.

Along with coach Bob Peters, Campbell expanded eligibility for the Crimson Knights from just St. James students to all other public and parochial schools in the Woodbridge area. They also have kids from South Plainfield, Plainfield, Kenilworth and Rahway.

"Our biggest goal is to give the kids a taste of the sport," Campbell said, "to teach them the fundamentals." Younger runners practice two days a week during the season, race on Sundays and are expected to train on their own for an additional day. Older students train three times a week with the team and race on Sundays.

Racing involves running 800 meters, 1 mile, 3,000, 4,000 and 5,000 meters, depending on the age of the runner. Boys compete against other boys, though boys and girls may train together, depending on ability.

Practice, which lasts just an hour each session, includes "plyometrics, a little bit of speedwork on the track, some pacework, maybe some fartlekking, some tempo runs, nothing crazy. This is just an introduction to cross country running," Campbell said. "We don't really want to see any kids running longer than 4,000 and 5,000

meters, and that's only the older ones."

Campbell said the coaches set individual goals and objectives for each child in the program, a time goal based on what they get to know about their ability and what they feel will help build their self esteem. "The effort that they put into it is what they take away when they cross the finish line," he said.

When a runner has a "breakout" race, exceeding his or her goal, the coaches recalibrate and come up with a new number. "We've had some disappointed kids and some overachievers. As coach you have to be careful to maintain a balance, especially when you have 50 kids on the roster."

Campbell rates his success by the fact that many of his graduates have gone on to perform well on their high school track teams and that many of them come back regularly to help coach the younger kids.

"Several of our kids have made their mark. Other programs beat the kids to death but I know we're doing the right thing because we don't have any kids that stop running. This is something they will do for a lifetime," Campbell said.

Even kids who like to do other sports, such as basketball, as his daughter Elizabeth did, find the running helps keep them in good playing shape.

Campbell, a Level 1 USATF certified coach, said training kids is different from training adults. "For one thing, we don't have to coach around things like recovery. We generally aren't going to have the soreness the adults get from a serious regimentation. We don't want to kids to do any weight training. They're too young. And we have to keep them motivated, so the practices are only an hour. We want to get them home and let them get to their homework or their dinner.

"This is a regular, awesome, healthy routine. It keeps the kids away from the TV," he said.

Cross country running is different from road racing, he said, in that course strategy is more important.

"It's a big deal because there are the uphill and downhill and different sections of the course that are of concern," he said.

The team races in Holmdel, "the capital of New Jersey cross-country racing."

To keep up with his teenage daughters, do his job in internet security software, and have time for family life, Campbell said he gets up very early in the morning or sometimes trains late at night. "I put on the reflectors and get out there and do my best. I have to train hard and race well so I have some kind of credentials or the kids won't listen to me."

On the Fourth of July, Campbell ran the Cranford Firecracker 4 with his daughters. His wife, Kathleen, is an avid biker.

He's also run six marathons but is in "semi-retirement" from marathons until his daughters finish high school and he hits the lottery or finds some other way to cut back at work.

"I'll continue coaching as long as the kids come out and I have the legs and the ability to help them," Campbell said.

His teams have done well and each year he's had to get on a plane with the most successful runners to travel to national competitions in Chicago, Nevada, New Mexico or other distant places. This year, for the first time he can remember, the championship race will be on their home turf at Holmdel.

"Going to the national championship is just awesome. There are 300 to 400 kids per race, with Kodak

moments you just can't believe," Campbell said.

Nothing would please Campbell more than to have lots more kids join the Crimson Knights, as well as more assistant coaches. "One year, we took 11 kids to the nationals and that was terrific," he said.

One problem Campbell said he's never had as a youth cross country coach is the parental misbehavior that's been reported among other sports. "We have the best parents. I never get complaints. I don't know if we've found the successful formula or if it's just the right sport attracting the right kids and parents, but we never have a problem."

The first event of the season for the Crimson Knights is the Woodbridge Crossroads race on Sept. 4. Members of the team are encouraged to run the 1-mile or 5K race.

For more information about the Crimson Knights, see the web site at www.leaguelineup.com.

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