

What To Say Before They Compete

*Parent's guide to last minute tips
for young athletes*



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INTRODUCTION

This booklet is for busy parents of young athletes. It aims to make it easy for you to help your little athlete be the best they can, without needing to do a mini coaching degree.

The typical scenario at an athletics meet goes like this. Your child's event is called. You have only a moment to say something before they head off. You want to say something that is encouraging *and constructive*. Something that should they focus on while doing the event, is likely to improve how well they run, jump or throw. What do you say?

This booklet gives you ideas for those constructive last minute tips.

A general overview of each event is given to provide a context for the tips. If you want details on technique for specific events, there is a wealth of information on the Internet. I recommend that you start by looking on the Little Athletics Australia website www.littleathletics.com.au. It is also worth looking at the information provided by each State. You can do this by following the links from the national website. Of course, if your child has a coach, they will be the best starting point for technical advice.

Naturally, there is no one right thing to say just before an event. It depends a lot on your child and (if they are being coached) the coaching approach. For some children saying nothing may be the best strategy. If you have a nervous child they may respond best to a comment containing a touch of humour such as "a smiling face makes you run a quicker race" or "it's only high jump, so get over it."

Over coaching at the last minute can be very counter productive. Don't feel inadequate if you hear another parent giving their child a full run down on shot put technique just before the event. A simple "compete as you have trained", or "just have fun" can be very reassuring to a child. You might want to promote competitions as just another type of training opportunity.

Each section below lists a number of tips. I don't suggest that you use them all at the same time. On competition day just pick one for each event that seems most relevant to your child.

SPRINTS

In general, running speed is created by stride length and frequency.

Coaches are renown for saying things like “you run with your arms”. This is because the speed of athlete’s arms will help determine the speed of their legs. Saying, “move your feet faster” is useful, but possibly not as effective as saying “drive your arms faster”.

It can be very tempting for young athletes to look across at other competitors during a race but it will slow them down a tad.

Some athletes end their race a bit early, slowing on their final steps before reaching the finish line. Others don’t have very effective starts or have a poor running posture.

Last Minute Tips

“Power forward off the start line.”

“Look ahead as you run.”

“Drive your arms fast.”

“Run tall.”

“Run on the balls of your feet.”

“Run hard through the finish line.”

LONGER RUNS

Longer runs allow athletes to learn pace judgement and how to execute a “game plan” that compliments their fitness. Young athletes don’t usually start with very good pace judgement. It is a skill learnt over time. They might have fun designing a simple game plan such as deciding to sprint from a particular point in the race. Older athletes may assess the strengths of competitors and use strategies like surges within a race or a strong finish. Sometimes a young athlete’s running style deteriorates during longer races as their fitness level is challenged. This deterioration in running style can then further impact on their performance.

Last Minute Tips

“Get a confident start.”

“Find a nice rhythm that is relaxed, while keeping the energy in your stride.”

“Maintain a good running style through the middle of the race.”

“Run at your own pace.”

“Use relaxed, rhythmic strides.”

“Run tall.”

“Use your arms to help you run.”

“Look ahead as you run.”

“Power home over the finish line”

HURDLES

An athlete with good technique will seem to stride over each hurdle rather than jump it. They do a push-pull action where their leading leg is pushed out over the hurdle and then the back leg is pulled over in a bent position. Some coaches make a point of never saying, “jump” the hurdle because they feel the word jump is misleading.

By watching the youngest athletes you can usually see clear examples of how jumping *up* over a hurdle slows down the forward momentum and speed. In older athletes you may see some clear examples of how a “striding over” technique helps maintain the forward momentum and speed.

The hurdle technique is not a natural action. It is not the way a child might instinctively get over something in the playground. The technique will take time to develop.

As an athlete’s hurdle technique progresses, they start to form a rhythm where they do a standard number of steps between each hurdle. This enhances their speed even more.

Last Minute Tips

“Look for each hurdle then drive your leading leg over the top.”

“Power yourself towards each hurdle.”

“Count your strides between each hurdle.”

“Feel yourself striding over the hurdles rather than jumping them.”

WALKS

Technique is everything. Encourage your young athlete to favour technique over speed. If they don’t walk the correct way they get disqualified! I know a boy who won a medal in this event even though he was 7th over the finish line because a number of children in front of him were disqualified. This is a useful story to share with children.

Once a young athlete is confident in their technique they can work on speed and being able to keep that speed up for longer and longer periods. As with sprints, quick arms can help achieve quick legs, so intentionally swinging their arms can help with speed.

Keeping a relaxed upper body and having their head in an upright position will enhance the athlete’s overall technique.

Last Minute Tips

“Concentrate on your correct walking style.”

“Drive your arms to get more speed.”

“Relax your shoulders.”

“Look ahead.”

HIGH JUMP

The run up has a springy rhythmical style. It starts slow and gets faster as the athlete approaches the bar.

The athlete converts the momentum from the run-up into a vertical lift at take-off. The athlete's lead leg and arms are lifted vigorously to assist in creating the upward momentum while the take-off leg pushes off the ground.

Most young athletes will start by using a scissors style jump and then progress at the appropriate time to a flop style jump.

Last Minute Tips

"Make your run up rhythmical and springy."

"Run faster as you get closer to the bar."

"Drive you lead leg and arms upwards when you take-off."

"Push off the ground strongly with your take-off foot."

LONG JUMP

There are 4 parts to this jump. The run-up, take-off, flight and landing.

During the run-up the athlete needs to gradually speed up so that they reach their fastest speed (without losing control) at the take-off point. Developing accuracy, rhythm and consistency in the run-up is helpful.

The take-off transfers the energy from the run-up into a vertical lift. It can help if the young athlete's eyes are looking straight ahead, their take-off foot is planted in a firm (but not stamped), flat-footed manner and if their free knee and arms drive up powerfully.

There are different flight techniques. These prepare for an efficient landing.

The landing is made with the feet in front of the body and the knees bend on contact to allow the body to move forward from the footmarks. Remembering to move forward when landing and leaving the pit is important, as the measurement is made from the sand indentation that is closest to the take-off point.

Last Minute Tips

"Choose a run up that gets you to your fast controlled pace by the take-off point but that does not wear you out before you jump."

"Start your run up at an easy pace and get to your fast controlled pace by the take-off point."

"Look ahead as you take-off."

"Chest up as you jump."

"Punch you knee high in to the air as you take-off."

"Feel your legs and arms powering you upwards as you take off."

"Stretch out and move forward as you land."

TRIPPLE JUMP

During the run-up athletes need to gradually speed up so that they reach their fastest speed (without losing control) at the take-off point. Developing accuracy, rhythm and consistency in the run-up is helpful.

The momentum from the run up is then carried through a hop, step and jump to get the best distance possible. Getting the jump technically and rhythmically correct can take some time.

Landing with a flat foot in the hop and step allows the momentum from the run up to be carried through the jump. An upright trunk with eyes looking ahead will assist young athletes to maintain balance through each phase.

Rhythm and evenness is important. For example, if the initial hop is too high or too long, an excessive amount of the momentum from the run up is lost in this phase.

Last Minute Tips

“Choose a run up that gets you to your fast controlled pace by the take-off point but that does not wear you out before you jump.”

“Start your run up at an easy pace and get to your fast controlled pace by the take-off point.”

“Hop and step with a firm flat foot”

“Look ahead as you take-off.”

“Aim to make your hop, step and jump even in size.”

DISCUS

The discus is thrown with a slinging type action. The aim is to get the discus into a flat spin by rolling it off the index finger. Coaches may get athletes doing various activities to learn how to get the discus rolling correctly off their index finger.

Young athletes usually first learn to do a standing throw that involves twisting away from the direction they will be throwing and then untwisting as they release the discus. Later they may progress to a turning throw technique.

The power in the throw comes progressively from each major muscle group as the body untwists or turns. The power starts in the feet and legs, then moves through the torso and arms leaving with the discus as it rolls off the athlete's index finger. The speed of the untwisting or turning adds to the power of the throw and the distance achieved.

Last Minute Tips

“Sling it with your whole body, not just your arm.”

“Look upwards in the direction you want the discus to travel.”

“Feel the power for your throw start in your legs, travel through your body and finally out of your arm.”

“Sling it fast.”

SHOT PUT

A shot is propelled with a pushing action not a throwing action. Young athletes often start using a basic standing technique and may later progress to gliding or rotating technique. A more fancy looking technique is not necessarily better. A well executed basic technique can give a young athlete better results than a poorly executed more complex technique.

Movement from the legs and body adds to the force with which the athlete is able to push the shot forward. The speed of the pushing action also enhances the distance that will be achieved.

Last Minute Tips

“Feel the force from the balls of your feet move up through your legs and body to help push the shot away into the air” or “Use your whole body, drive from your thighs, rotate from your stomach and punch out from your shoulder.”

“Give a really strong push with your arm.”

“Punch the shot out really fast.”

“Look up and out as you push the shot forward.”

JAVELIN

The Javelin is thrown with a pulling action of the body (mainly from the hip) and released with a pushing action of the shoulder and a fast arm strike.

Grip is important. There are various grip positions that are recommended by coaches but in general the javelin is held with the palm facing upwards.

Young athletes may be taught a standing throw to begin with and then progress to a style with a run up. Looking out ahead helps direct the flight path of the javelin.

Last Minute Tips

“Use your body, to help you pull the javelin forward and then feel your shoulder and arm push it out.”

“Send it off with a fast arm strike.”

“Look upwards in the direction you want the javelin to travel.”

SOME CLOSING COMMENTS

Of course the most important thing is that your child is having a go and having fun. Last minute tips that are simply motivational or reminding them to enjoy themselves may be best for your child. For example saying:

“Have Fun.”

“Just Be Your Best.”

“What is the Personal Best you are trying to beat today?”

Coaches Phrases

Coaches may use key words like “arms” or short phrases like “sprint and split” or “nose to toes” to help young athletes recall technique information from training. These only help athletes who have the context of the background training that goes with that phrase. There is not one standard set of training phrases so be careful of just borrowing phrases you hear from other families. If your child is being coached, ask them what key phrases or sayings their coach uses in a particular event to remind them of proper technique, and use these. Your child may get confused if you say “chin, knee, toe, make a bow, let it go” (a phrase you might hear from another parent or coach while watching a javelin event) if what their javelin coach is saying is “make a bow, long arm throw, watch it go”.

Stick with Positives at Competitions

When you watch your child’s event you may notice things they could do to improve. It may be best to leave that feedback for at home or on the way to their next training session. Hearing what they have just not done well may dampen their confidence and impact on their performance in their next event.

HOME PRACTICE IS THE KEY TO SUCCESS IN ANY SPORT

The tips in this book can also be used as your “technical input” during home practice. This will help connect your young athlete’s home training to their performance at competitions.

Oz Athletics Kids are Australia’s specialists in home practice equipment for little athletes. Three reasons you will love Oz Athletics Kids:

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2. Confident purchasing. The discus you need is not hidden amongst an array of other sporting equipment or discus varieties.
3. You are supporting a business that was started by a little athlete.

Wishing you all the best for the athletics season.

Wendy Palmer
Accredited Athletics Coach 2012

Acknowledgement

This booklet contains ideas and information distilled from many people who are dedicated to helping little athletes be the best they can. I would like to thank the generous athletics coaches from around Australia who shared their ideas and experience.

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