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GIRL TALK with Melody Fairchild

Douglas Finley, Editor

As coach of the Boulder Mountain Warriors Kid's Running Club and director/coach of her summer running camp for girls, Melody Fairchild knows the struggles girls and young women face. She has been there herself.

Melody believes that it takes a lot more than just knowing about running to be a great coach. It takes knowing how to get the best out of each athlete. This is especially true for coaching young girls, to help them contend with the physical and emotional challenges they are experiencing, or at least await them, as they mature.

"The changes girls go through are natural, inevitable, and most importantly, they are temporary," Melody said. "Yes, they can make running less enjoyable, even difficult initially, but rebelling against these changes is dangerous, creating yet more serious problems."

Melody feels that every coach, male or female, must be comfortable with talking about the physical changes girls can expect; the dangers of making unhealthy choices, and the increased risk of injury during this time period. She acknowledges this can be difficult for some coaches. Regardless, she is steadfast that the natural changes girls go through are an important conversation that coaches and girls need to have.

Physical Changes

As girls mature, their bodies change from that of a little girl to a young adult, often dramatically, some seemingly almost overnight. Height and weight gains are expected, menstruation begins, and characteristically, the hips widen. Fat tissue builds up, especially in the breasts, hips, buttocks, thighs and upper arms. These alter how the body functions.

For runners, these changes may alter their stride; they can cause stiffness in muscles and joints; and, because of added weight, may put unfamiliar demands on the legs and hips as the foot makes contact with the ground. For many girls, these changes are challenging enough, but when compounded with a loss of energy common when these changes occur, any vigorous activity becomes difficult.



EATING DISORDERS

*The implications of eating disorders greatly exceed the space allowed in this publication. For more information on this subject, search using key words **Eating Disorder and Female Athletes**.*

If you suspect there is immediate need, contact your family physician.

Running may feel unnatural, awkward and, reportedly, a lot more work and a lot less fun until the body adjusts. When all this happens, athletic performances frequently decline. For some, temporarily; for others it takes longer. Some girls simply quit running, leaving room for a new crop of runners: those with life's changes still waiting in the wings.

Unhealthy Decisions

Despite dire warnings, girls too often rebel against the natural changes as their body matures. For some it is an image issue, an obsession over having the "perfect body" that drives girls to make unhealthy decisions on what and how often they eat. For others, peer pressure plays a role. For runners, it often is the pursuit of perfection, the competitiveness, the need to run fast, to win. Just the fear of an extra pound becomes a barrier to success.

Unfortunately, dieting -- the dropping of a few pounds -- is not the answer, but only the beginning of a downward cycle for too many girls. Seeking the perfect body or being the better runner becomes a preoccupation, an obsession; ultimately an eating disorder.

The consequences of an eating disorder are both predictable and tragic. For starters, eating disorders in girls often lead to amenorrhea, the absence of menstruation. Amenorrhea decreases bone density and low bone density is a cause of stress fractures.

Injuries

Stress fractures are the most common injury for young female runners, not just from unhealthy eating decisions, but for many, the result of doing too much, too soon and too hard, i.e., overtraining.

Around the time girls enter high school (ages 13-14), they are likely to experience rapid growth in the long bones -- notably for runners, those of the lower leg. Just because these bones are suddenly longer has no bearing on their being stronger. To the contrary, they are the weak link in the chain. To pediatricians who specialize in sports injuries, heavy training while the bones are still growing in length is a primary cause of season-ending, and even career-ending, stress fractures in young girls.

Few today would dispute that injury is a big factor in cross country. When compared to non-contact sports only, one benchmark study (13 years and 60,000 student athletes) puts girls' cross country as #1 in sport injuries.

Melody Fairchild's Personal Story

Like many young girls in the 9th grade, Melody struggled with her body image. She fought to stay thin. Her parents protested, but Melody was determined. Favorite meals went untouched. She lost weight. She got weaker. Her performances declined. She vividly recalls dropping out of her signature run, the BolderBOULDER 10K, stepping off the course, alone, tearful, angry.

Start a Conversation

Having a conversation with young female athletes that even remotely touches on the subject of how their bodies will change as they mature can be intimidating, maybe even risky for male coaches.

The reality is, however, that saying nothing, staying away from talking about the risks associated with girls starving themselves, is not making the problem go away.

One option is to arrange for a health professional to talk to your young female runners about the importance of making healthy choices. For this, be sure to notify the parents well in advance.

Second is to host a workshop with parents on constructive ways they can share with their daughters the importance of making good decisions about eating and how it impacts their health.

Looking back, Melody believes she “sabotaged” her opportunity to post a fourth straight age-division win. “It was a huge disappointment,” she said. It also was a much-needed wake-up call.

Recognizing she was blessed with the talent to run fast, Melody told her sister “This (obsessing on being thin) is stupid.” Her sister agreed. Back to eating normally, Melody’s body made the corrections and running became fun again.

Before graduating from high school, Melody hit full stride, winning two Kinney (now Footlocker) National Cross Country titles and a top-three finish in the World Junior Cross Country Championships in Belgium.

In college, Melody saw where unhealthy eating and resulting injuries were cutting the careers of promising runners short; where she, too, felt the intense pressure for her to perform was putting her own health at risk. She took some time away from the sport; time to find her passion to run again.

Today, when talking to her young girls, either one-on-one or as a team, Melody always works on the positive. She teaches her girls to trust their bodies; to accept this process, to let it happen, to be patient and stay strong mentally.

She cautions them to be aware that the natural lack of bone density found in girls their age makes doing too much too soon an increased risk for stress fractures in the legs and feet. But she also tells them when estrogen kicks in they will get stronger, more resilient to the physical stresses running calls for.

She also encourages girls to eat healthy, rather than starve themselves; to take time to gain muscle, to be fit, athletic; to exploit the changes in their body rather than fighting those changes. Helping girls to become strong, confident runners is her objective. These are what will allow girls to pursue their goals as their body adapts to the changes.

Health and longevity, to Melody, are what’s most important. After all, running is a lifetime pursuit, not just a high school sport.

REFERENCES

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Leadville 10K Photo: Glen Delman

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editor@childrensrunning.org

Melody, now a master’s runner (40+) is again at the top of her sport with national age-group titles on the roads at the 5K, 10K, and 15K distances, in cross country, and the Trail Half-Marathon. New to Melody’s résumé are top overall finishes in long distance trail and mountain races on the international stage, including piloting the U.S. team to a World Championship Mountain Racing title in 2012.



Melody Fairchild still running strong in the Leadville 10K

To learn more about Melody Fairchild’s Youth Running Club and her 2018 Girls Summer Resident Running Camp in the Rocky Mountains above Boulder, CO, visit

melodyfairchild.com