



13. Remember to Sleep

What's the least exciting ingredient in the recipe to becoming an excellent high school runner? Sleep. You want to train hard so that you can race fast—that's the fun stuff! To absorb your training gains and recover from racing, however, you have to sleep. This is how you will gain fitness over the course of the season.

***Sleep is like a
secret ingredient
in the recipe of
running success.***

As a high school runner, you need enough sleep to support the training your coach assigns you, to support the physical growth of adolescence, and to support academic performance. Because you're making demands on your body every day in practice, you're going to need more sleep than your non-running classmates. Your job is to find another 20 or 30 or 45 minutes in your already hectic schedule for sleep.

Paul Vandersteen coaches the boy's team at Neuqua Valley High School, in Naperville, Illinois. He is a great coach with a number of useful resources for his athletes, including an approach to "championship sleep."

Neuqua Valley Men's Cross Country & Track and Field							
WHAT TIME SHOULD YOU GO TO BED?							
Wake-up Time							
	5:30am	6:00am	6:30am	7:00am	7:30am	8:00am	8:30am
Bed Time							
Awful	10:30pm	11:00pm	11:30pm	12:00am	12:30am	1:00am	1:30am
Bad	10:00pm	10:30pm	11:00pm	11:30pm	12:00am	12:30am	1:00am
Minimal	9:30pm	10:00pm	10:30pm	11:00pm	11:30pm	12:00am	12:30am
Mediocre	9:00pm	9:30pm	10:00pm	10:30pm	11:00pm	11:30pm	12:00am
Good	8:30pm	9:00pm	9:30pm	10:00pm	10:30pm	11:00pm	11:30pm
Champion	8:15pm	8:30pm	9:00pm	9:30pm	10:00pm	10:30pm	11:00pm

This table is brutally honest with the numbers. You know when you need to wake up, so you can work backwards and see what time you need to go to bed. And the lesson is a clear one: you can't expect to be a good or champion runner if you're getting an awful or minimal amount of sleep week after week. If you have a day or two where you get mediocre or even bad sleep, just don't let it become a habit. With sleep, you can get back on track and string together several good nights of consistency-building rest.

You're in high school. Of course, you will have a night here or there where you either go to bed late or sleep poorly. You might have to study late for an important test. You might get home late from a track meet. There are days when you have to get up much earlier than normal. The key with sleep is that you're as consistent as possible, and that you get enough rest to support your training, your physical growth, and your academic workload.

Sleep may not be all that exciting, but it is like a secret ingredient in the recipe of running success. It does wonders. And no, you can't make up for a week's worth of bad sleep by sleeping in really late on Saturday or Sunday morning.

Think of running and then think of lifting weights. Which one builds you up? Lifting weights, of course. The term "anabolic" literally means "building up." The chassis-building work we've covered is anabolic. After an hour of sleep, your body releases signaling molecules that also build you up—

testosterone and human growth hormone, or HGH, that all athletes, regardless of age or gender, need to strengthen their chassis. The more sleep, the more your body releases these important substances that basically say, time to repair yourself!

The opposite of anabolic is catabolic, which means “breaking down.” Running is a catabolic activity. On the micro-level, it literally tears your muscles down. If you get ample sleep, however, your body can rebuild itself. Most athletes—from middle school runners all the way to professional runners—find that they need more sleep as they train harder. This is because they have more and more rebuilding that needs to be done each day.

You might be thinking, “Got it. I need to sleep. If I’m honest, I need more sleep. But sometimes, I have a hard time sleeping. What do I do then?” If that’s the case, you want to maximize the quality of the sleep you do get.

That’s where the concept of sleep hygiene comes in. The first time I heard this term, I thought “like dental hygiene,” and that’s not too far off the mark. In the same way you have a routine for taking care of your teeth, you need a routine to allow your body to fall asleep. High school student-athletes need sleep hygiene to support their training, their physical growth during adolescence, and the significant challenges of high school academics.

Admittedly, sleep hygiene is a little bit like flossing. You may not like it at first, but it can have a dramatic impact. So it’s best to establish the routine and stick to it.

What’s not to like about sleep hygiene? Well, you need to stay off your phone at night. That’s because your phone emits light—so-called blue light—that is different than the light in your bedroom. Your tablet, your computer, and your TV also emit it. Blue light throws off your body’s internal clock, or circadian rhythm. And this is very disruptive to your ability to fall asleep and to the quality of the sleep you do get. Compromise either of those, and you won’t be rebuilding your muscles fully.

As with many things related to running, the solution to a disrupted circadian rhythm is simple but not easy. Choose to make the 60 to 90 minutes before bed screen-free. I know you’re thinking, “How the heck am I going to be able to do that?” At first, it’ll be a hard habit to establish. But like flossing, it’ll be good for you—and good for your running. Putting your phone away an hour or so before bed is a small choice, but one that will have a big impact on your training and racing—regardless of your genetic ability.

Sleep more. Sleep better.

And each night will lead to solid training and faster racing.