
WHAT IS CROSS COUNTRY?

Cross Country (abbreviated CC or XC) is a running event in which runners compete to complete a course over open or rough terrain. The courses used at these events may include grass, mud, woodlands, hills, flat ground and water. It is a popular participatory sport, and usually takes place in temperate regions during the autumn and winter when soft conditions underfoot prevail.

It is one of the sports which, along with track and field, road running, and racewalking, makes up the umbrella sport of athletics. The foremost elite competition is the IAAF World Cross Country Championships. Cross country also features as part of the modern pentathlon at the Summer Olympic Games. Cross country featured on the Olympic athletics programme between 1912 and 1924 but was dropped for following editions.

HISTORY

Cross country is an organized sport that originated from the Crick Run held nearly every year since 1838 at Rugby School in England. In the early 19th century, cross country was practiced in all private schools in England. In 1851, undergraduates at Exeter College, Oxford organized a foot grind. This was an analogy with steeple chasing on horse where a race would be held towards the nearest church steeple, forcing riders to clear rural obstacles such as hedges, fences, and ditches. A two-mile cross country steeplechase formed part of the Oxford University sports (in which many of the modern athletics events were founded) in 1860, but was replaced in 1865 by an event over barriers on a flat field, which became the modern steeplechase in athletics.

In 1878, the sport was introduced to the United States by William C. Vosburgh. At first, the sport served mainly as training for summer track and field athletics. Nine years later, cross country running became a formal sport in the United States. Despite the international popularity of cross-country, the sport was dropped from the Olympic Games after 1924 due to it being an inappropriate summer sport. In the 1960s, the International Amateur Athletic Federation, which regulates cross-country running, allowed women to run for the first time.

Internationally, the IAAF organizes the World Cross Country Championships. In recent years, courses have tended to change to faster, drier courses than the traditional ones.

COURSES AND DISTANCES

Each cross-country running course is different in its make-up. Distances vary for age groups, and are decided by the race directors and are usually split up based on the gender of the runners. There are usually two different types of cross-country meets, competitions (such as dual meets, conference championships, state championships, etc.) and invitationals. The invitationals are traditionally larger meets because they are open to any team and individual runners with no affiliations. Carroll XC team will race mostly 5k's (3.12 miles) throughout the season.

THE START

Races are started in masses, sometimes with each team having its own bull pen or box along the start line. Boxes may be big enough to fit the entire team on the starting line. In some meets, there is only enough room

for one or two runners from each team on the line. The 3-5 remaining team members (a team requiring 5-7 runners) follow in a line, and if permitted may flow into other boxes. A gun or horn is then sounded, and runners have a few hundred meters to converge from the wide starting line into the much narrower path that must be followed until the finish.

MARKING THE COURSE

The runner is responsible for staying within a specified distance of the marked path. The course length is measured using a distance wheel. When the course is "walked out" by the wheel, the course markers will be placed no more than 3 feet away on the inside of the turn. If one runs every turn tight, they will theoretically be running a shorter distance than the course claims to be. Courses may be marked using various methods, such as tape, chalk, ribbons, paint, cones, and flags. When flags or cones are used, the runner must stay to the outside of the marker at each turn; on the other hand, when ribbons or paint lines are used, the runner must follow the line (if parallel lines are used runners must stay between the lines, or if a single line is used they must stay within a certain distance of the line). Often, volunteers stand on the course and point in the correct direction to go at an intersection.

DURING THE RACE

After the first 200–300 meters, runners typically fall into their "race pace", or a steadier pace that can be maintained for a long period of time. When runners try to maintain the initial start speed, they will go into "oxygen debt" early, and lose much of their momentum. The course may be entirely flat, or runners may encounter a series of hills, patches of mud, or obstacles like small creeks to run through. Runners are not permitted to come into physical contact with each other. This will result in disqualification. Different strategies may be used among runners on different teams. One strategy is to "change speeds", or pick up the pace for 200–300 meters every few minutes. This may help runners pass others and score better for their team. This part of the race generally lasts until the runners are about 400 meters from the end, where the finishing stage of the course begins.

THE FINISH

The course usually ends at a finish line located at the beginning of a funnel or chute. The chute is a long walkway marked with flags that keeps athletes single-file in order of finishing. Since every place could potentially make a difference, runners will normally try to overtake as many people as possible in this stretch.

Helpers at the finish line assist in making sure the athletes keep moving through the line while staying in order as more runners come through. They settle close finishes and help along any collapsing athletes to make sure that they get their numbers in the right order. The helpers that work the chute also are in charge of giving water to the finishers and helping them if they are having trouble (vomiting, collapsing, trouble breathing, etc.).

One method of timing which is being used somewhat more often, most commonly larger races, is chip timing. Each runner is given a transponder working on a RFID basis before the race to tie to their shoe; when the runner crosses the finish line they step on an electronic pad which records the chip number and is matched to the

runner from an already made database. Occasionally there will also be checkpoint mats or mile mats to deliver splits and make sure runners go over the entire course. This is by far the most accurate method, although it is somewhat expensive.

SCORING

When two or more teams of cross country runners compete, a score may be compiled to determine which team is the better. Points are awarded to the individual runners of eligible teams, equal to the position in which they cross the finish line (first place gets 1 point, second place gets 2 points, etc.). Teams are considered ineligible to score if they have fewer than the meet's required number of scorers, which is typically five. Only the first five runners in for a team are counted towards that team's score; the points for these runners are summed, and the teams are ranked based on the total, with lowest being best. In the event of a tie, the rules vary depending on the competition; often the team that closes scoring first wins, though in the US NCAA ties are possible. In high school competition, if two teams tie, then the victor is decided by whose sixth runner, the first one whose score does not count, finished first.

The lowest possible score in a five-to-score match is 15 ($1+2+3+4+5$), achieved by a team's runners finishing in each of the top five positions. If there is a single opposing team then they would have a score of 40 ($6+7+8+9+10$), which can be considered a "sweep" for the winning team. In some competitions a team's sixth and seventh runner are scored in the overall field and are known as "pushers" or "displacers" as their place can count ahead of other runners. In the above match, if there are two non-scoring runners and they came 6th and 7th overall, the opponent's score would be 50 ($8+9+10+11+12$).

EQUIPMENT

Cross-country running involves very little specialized equipment. Most races are run in shorts and vests or singlets, usually in club or school colors. In particularly cold conditions, long-sleeved shirts and tights can be worn to retain warmth without losing mobility. The most common footwear worn consists of a pair of spikes, sometimes called cleats, which are lightweight racing shoes that incorporate metal spikes, known as teeth, into the sole. These spikes are changed depending on race conditions. For example, if the course is muddy a larger spike will be used. Regulation teeth for cross country courses range from .25-.5 inches (6.4mm - 12.7mm). While spikes are suitable for grassy, muddy, or slippery conditions, runners may choose to wear racing flats if the course includes significant portions of paved surfaces or dirt road. Flats are typically less aggressive in foot positioning and heavier than spikes. They possess less rigid outsole tread than spikes and do not have any metal teeth.

