The 7 Laws of 400/600/800 Meter Coaching Success

A CompleteTrackandField.com Interview with Jacksonville University Head Coach, Ron Grigg

I’m Latif Thomas of CompleteTrackandField.com and as a high school coach, I know how confusing it can be to both plan effective training, as well as organize and run effective training sessions for this particular event group.

Traditionally, 400/600/800 runners are too slow to be true sprinters (55m-400m). And they don’t possess the 'endurance' to be true middle distance runners (800-1600).

Today, we’re going to explore specific solutions to these problems in order to help you maximize the potential of your athletes.

In this edition of “The 7 Laws of Coaching Success”, I’m talking to Jacksonville University Head Coach Ron Grigg about the secrets behind coaching primary event 400/600/800 runners to their best performances.

If you’re not familiar with Ron Grigg, take a minute read about some of his coaching highlights before we get started:

"Ron Grigg continues to raise the level of the Dolphins’ success as he starts his 12th season as the director of track& field and cross country and his 14th overall at JU.

Grigg has made the Dolphins track program a beacon in the Atlantic Sun Conference by winning the A-Sun Indoor and Outdoor Championships in each of the last eight seasons – earning “Coach of the Year” in all 16 of those titles, as well as, earning the United States Track and Field and Cross Country Coaches Association South Region Women’s “Coach of the Year” in 2008. Since taking over as head coach, Grigg has directly coached 124 conference champions in track and 253 all-conference performances. The program has also produced 313 Atlantic Sun All-Academic performers during that time.

Last season, the Dolphins would sweep the indoor and outdoor titles for the eighth straight year – extending their conference record. The Dolphins have won every indoor title since the conference added the sport in 2006, while JU’s outdoor team holds the record for the most consecutive titles in A-Sun history.

Senior Bienna Freeman became the fifth athlete in JU history to earn All-American honors after her performance in the 800m at the NCAA Outdoor Championships. In addition to Freeman, senior Joane Pierre and sophomore Shanique Walker also advanced to the NCAA
Outdoor Championships giving the Dolphins a program best three representatives. Walker enjoyed a breakout season for the JU culminating with her record setting performance at the A-Sun Outdoor Championships in which she set the meet record for the 100m hurdles en route to earning 32.5 team points and Most Valuable Performer Honors. Fellow senior Charlene Charles added to her storied JU resume by becoming the first athlete in A-Sun history to win the long jump three times at the Indoor Championships.

The 2012 cross country season saw history made when Pierre became the first Dolphin in program history to win the individual conference title. She won with a time of 17:17.5 to win and secure first team all-conference honors for the third time in her career. Pierre went on to finish seventh at the NCAA South Regional and advanced to the NCAA Cross Country Championships and finished her career as the program record holder in the 5K (17:17.5) and 6K (20:22.1).

In 2009-10, the Dolphins became the first A-Sun school to win the Triple Crown after securing the cross country, indoor and outdoor track championships.

From 2006-09, Grigg worked with Natasha Harvey, who finished her career as one of the best athletes in school history. Harvey earned a school-record five All-America honors in the long jump, secured seven berths in the NCAA Championships, produced 18 NCAA regional qualifying marks, won 22 individual conference titles and recorded 35 all-conference honors. She also won “Most Outstanding Performer” meet honors at the A-Sun Championships nine times and competed with Team USA twice (2006, 2008). Harvey got it done in the classroom as well, earning JU female “Student of the Year” honors and becoming the first female athlete in school history to be named A-Sun “Student-Athlete of the Year” for the 2008-09 school year.

Grigg also recruited and coached Monique Tubbs, the school’s first national champion (60-meter dash, 7.29) and a four-time All-America honoree; and Andrea Pressley, who finished fourth in the heptathlon at the 2004 NCAA Outdoor Championships.

Besides the four All-America honorees and the 17 NCAA Division I Championship qualifiers, Grigg has coached more than 100 A-Sun Conference champions and 200 all-conference performers. School records have been set in 20 of 23 outdoor events and 19 out of 21 indoor track events during Grigg’s tenure as assistant and head coach.

His teams have also shown success in the classroom, receiving the USTFCCCA All-Academic Team award for 10 consecutive years (2002-11). Since his return in 2001, the Dolphins have had more than 200 academic all-conference selections among the cross country and track teams.

Prior to coming to Jacksonville in 1998, Grigg was an assistant coach at Division III power Wheaton (Mass.) College. Under Grigg’s tutelage, nine Wheaton athletes earned a total of 21 All-America honors while capturing two individual NCAA championships and two national titles in the 4×400-meter relay. In addition, the 1997 men’s team finished seventh in the

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nation and the women’s squad finished as NCAA runners-up in both indoors and outdoors in 1998.

Grigg earned his bachelor’s degree in political science from the University of Massachusetts-Dartmouth in 1993. He holds USATF Level II coaching certifications in sprints, hurdles, jumps, throws and multi-events, and instructs USATF Level I and Level II schools regularly."

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Now that you know more about the full range of Coach Grigg's experience and coaching success, let's dive into "The 7 Laws of 400/600/800 Coaching Success".

This isn't a thesis or an attempt to fill up space with fluff and nonsense. The goal is to give you straight forward, practical information you can use to positively improve your approach to programming for this fascinating event group and group of athletes.

The format is simple: I'll ask Coach Grigg the question/s and he'll provide the answer/s. We'll get started on the next page...
I. The Law of Talent Identification

**Latif Thomas:** This event group is commonly referred to as ‘tweeners’: athletes that don’t have the absolute speed to be successful sprinters, but don’t have the “endurance” to be middle distance or distance runners. But, you’ve said that you don’t consider the athletes to be tweeners, but, instead, that the event group itself, as well as the coaches are the tweeners. That coaches, generally, are more comfortable coaching sprinters OR are more comfortable coaching middle distance and distance runners.

That said, how do we assess, address and analyze the biomotor/physical capacities of our athletes in order to determine whether and where athletes with the particular set of capabilities best suited to the 400/600 & 800m events?

**Ron Grigg:** Athletes will show us their gifts by how they are able to handle certain kinds of training. It is important to have variety in training so athletes can show us their gifts. Using a variety of training protocols we should be able to see who are the most coordinated athletes, who possess the top speeds, and who excels in those tough “longer faster rep” sessions.

It is easier to compare the athletes who are currently in our training groups to one another just through observation. What is slightly more difficult is determining in which event group they will ultimately be successful. That requires a little knowledge on the specific demands of each event. We also need to be able to identify what “good” is in the bigger picture. Just because someone is the fastest kid on your team, does not always mean their best gifts are as a short sprinter. It may simply mean that we don’t have a population of short sprinters with which to work. The fastest person on our team, might be the best 800 meter runner in the state. So we must provide opportunities in training to assess all of those qualities.
II. The Law of Age & Gender

Latif Thomas: Once you’ve identified talent, how does age, (training, biological, chronological), as well as gender, affect your approach to developing this event group range?

Ron Grigg: The duration of the event will dictate the aerobic/anaerobic energy contributions. So a senior boy and a freshman girl may have different energy needs while racing the same event.

400/600/800 meter success at higher levels requires some physical maturity. Younger athletes are better served emphasizing general training on both ends of the speed and endurance spectrum.

When in environments with lots of racing opportunities, it may be appropriate to let the races serve as the primary means for specific “training.” For example, what do you do when you have, say, two dual meets during the week?

Having those two meets eliminates the need for any additional specific training. When in doubt, stay general in your training and let the races serve as the specific. The good news is there is nothing wrong with “racing the athlete into shape” if it can be part of an appropriately designed training plan.

Once a coach has an understanding of what qualities to train and how to train them in isolation, then they can get creative in combining some of these qualities in unique ways. The good news is designing training for the 400/600/800 meter athlete isn’t easy, but nothing worthwhile ever is!
III. The Law of Endurance

Latif Thomas: Coaches who come from a ‘distance’ background tend to steer their training toward the ‘high volume, low intensity’ end of the spectrum. Coaches coming from a ‘sprints’ background tend to employ a ‘quality over quantity’ approach to training.

Athletes who succeed in this event range naturally possess greater speed qualities than endurance qualities. But, endurance is still a critical, if not predominant demand from a program design standpoint.

That said, how do you define ‘endurance’ work for this event group and what role does it play in training, compared to a traditional ‘sprints’ or ‘middle distance’ program?

Ron Grigg: Endurance has different meanings to different people. Some people think of endurance as only aerobic training, but I think that doesn’t tell the whole story. There is even an endurance quality to be trained in a 100m race. Sprint coaches might call it Short Speed Endurance. In reality there is a continuum of paces that range from 100 meter pace to marathon pace that will all develop some forms of endurance required to be successful at 400/600/800 meters.

Latif Thomas: Does running mileage develop the endurance qualities required to succeed at these race distances? If so, how much? If not, what type of work should be done in its place?

Ron Grigg: I don’t think in terms of mileage for this group, but there are aerobic training qualities that must be addressed and there is a continuous running component to being successful at 800 meters for sure.

If you think you have found an athlete who has the gifts for competing in the 400/600/800 meter distances, we have to find a way to address these issues.

A few years ago we had an athlete who was an 800 meter specialist who also ran on our school record 4x4. The athlete hated distance running. It was frustrating for me as a coach to send the athlete out on a 30 or 45 minute run only to see that this athlete was already 100 meters behind the distance runners after only 3 minutes of running, even though the pace wasn’t fast. This athlete would even get dropped in warm up jogs. It wasn’t that the athlete didn’t have the ability to handle endurance training successfully, but the athlete’s belief perpetuated their unpreparedness. The results showed in cross country races. The athlete didn’t like the distance running, and didn’t like the distance races. Therefore the athlete also didn’t believe they were good at anything beyond 800 meters.
There is a saying, “whether you think you can or think you can’t, you are absolutely right.”

I had to figure out another way to get the athlete the essential aerobic qualities to improve 800 meter times. By implementing shorter and slower repetitions with jogging recoveries at ever increasing volumes, and by implementing shorter continuous tempo runs (such as 10 and 15 minutes) on the track at faster paces, I was able to monitor the efforts and ensure there was proper intensity to the volume.

Over the course of 2 seasons the athlete improved their 800 meter personal best by 5 seconds and qualified for the NCAA Championships. But the athlete also improved their 1500 meter time by almost 20 seconds, and gained the ability and confidence to drop well over 2 minutes for 5k of cross country, all while continuing to get faster over 400 meters!
IV. The Law of Strength & Power

Latif Thomas: We can improve our athletes’ overall fitness, running economy and mechanics. And it will improve their performance. But, at some point, especially in the 4/6/8 event range where speed is a necessity, a ceiling is hit if the athlete does not develop increasing levels of physical strength and power in order to propel their body farther, faster and while burning less energy to do so.

At the same time, athletes competing primarily in the 400/600/800 distances are not true sprinters, throwers or power lifters. The fundamental question is:

How much strength training does this group require compared to, say, the standard sprints group?

Ron Grigg: Speed and power are essential for success at 400/600/800 meters. These qualities can be trained in the weight room, but that is not near as important as it would be for a pure sprinter. When they are ready, I like to see that the 400/600/800 meter athletes can squat and clean with appropriate techniques for all of the same reasons that those lifts would be important to sprint training. I like those lifts for their enhancement of core strength, coordination and range of motion. However, much of this can be addressed away from the weight room, saving the weight room for later in the progression of strength and power development if appropriate.

Latif Thomas: Then what types of strength & power training activities do you favor with this group?

Ron Grigg: Strength and power must always be age appropriate. Body weight circuits can be done to develop general strength. The throwing of medballs can be done for power development, and simple jumping exercises like jump rope can be used to work on elastic strength. These can all be done with novice athletes, and they will help develop the requisite qualities, concepts and skills that will one day lead to the weight room.
V. The Law of Speed

Latif Thomas: Most coaches, even those with distance backgrounds, understand that speed development is a required element of a well designed training program.

But, how should speed development be approached with this event group? Is a 'long to short' or 'short to long' approach the most effective?

Ron Grigg: Speed is the crucial quality in every running event. Races don't measure how far you go, they measure how fast you get there.

Successful athletes in the 400/600/800 meter events have the traits to be fast. We must maximize the strengths of our athletes while also minimizing the weaknesses. While short to long may be how to describe the speed training portion of working with 400/600/800 meter athletes, it is not that simple. There are many other things that also need to be addressed simultaneously. With this event group there is both a short to long and long to short approach happening simultaneously that ultimately meet at the specific race demands for these events.
VI. The Law of Jedi Mind Tricks

Latif Thomas: Some athletes consider themselves ‘sprinters’ regardless of their performance. At the high school level in particular, there is an assumption that being a sprinter is ‘easier’ than being a distance runner. Kids believe that either the training, expectations and/or workouts are easier and/or that the training/racing doesn’t hurt nearly as much as the longer endurance based events.

Unfortunately, most kids are not built to be 55-400m sprinters.

How do we convince ‘slow sprinters’ to buy into moving up to this event group when they think they’re sprinters and fear the discomfort of training and competing in this event group?

Ron Grigg: Everything we train has a progression, including the mentality of the athletes. Athletes tend to like the things they think they are good at, and shy away from things they think they are not good at.

Our job as coaches is to design training that will allow the athletes to be successful, and therefore enjoy (or at least not HATE) the training, while still training the qualities we know they need. Sometimes that includes withholding some information, or even a little trickery. I liken it to how my mom feeds her dog its medicine. If she puts the pill in front of the dog, it will simply stare at it and never take it. But if she puts it inside a piece of baloney, the dog will take the medicine without ever knowing it was there.

With this event group, we often have to design training that looks like training they enjoy, but by manipulating paces, rest intervals and volumes it can achieve the goals we desire. Once the athletes have had some success completing the training and have the physical benefits of that training, they should be able to progress to more challenging training with an improved confidence in their abilities to be successful at the more challenging training.

This is EXACTLY what I had to do with the 800 meter athlete cited in the previous example. But the same has worked for moving kids who thought they were 100 meter runners up to the 400, and turning heptathletes who were petrified of the 800 into it being one of their stronger events when compared to their competition.
VII. The Law of Practice Organization

Latif Thomas: At the high school level in particular, as coaches we find ourselves in charge of too many athletes and not enough time, staff or resources to optimize their training.

I want to get the best results for and out of my athletes, regardless of event group, but I have to be aware of the fact that the more groups I create, the harder it is for me to manage workouts. Especially interval type workouts where recording times and managing rest is critical to the success and efficiency of the workout, as well as the physiological effect on the athletes.

When it comes to developing primary event 400/600/800 meter runners, should we treat and train these athletes as an entirely separate group? (like 'sprints' or 'distance') Or do we have them train with the distance group? Or the sprints group?

Ron Grigg: At any point in time, either or both the sprint group and distance group should be doing training that is appropriate for the 400/600/800 meter athletes. With a little bit of coordination, and probably only minor modifications your 400/600/800 meter athlete should be able to thrive in either session. Conversely, you may choose to design an appropriate training session for the 400/600/800 meter group and then invite the distance group or the sprint group to join.

So, when you have a plan you’re confident in, the answer is:

A) sometimes the sprints group
B) sometimes the distance group
C) sometimes their own group.

Latif Thomas: Keeping those things in mind, do coaches model their workout times off of their faster sprint (200) times or their middle distance (800) times?

Ron Grigg: I would use 200 meter times when writing workouts that deal with speed endurance qualities. I would use 800 meter times when prescribing any workouts that deal with endurance qualities.

Theoretical Equivalencies can help you find the proper paces. And remember, training zones are exactly that:

Zones.
While we may come up with exact numbers, the body will receive the benefits of the training as long as it is “within a reasonable ballpark.” Then the goal of the coach and the athlete is to assess the training session and design a progression for what it next.

**Latif Thomas:** Coach Grigg, you gave us a lot to think about in a concise amount of space.

When coaches begin to apply these concepts to their training and overall approach to coaching this event group, they’re sure to experience universal improvements in performance with all athletes competing in this event group.

If you're interested in purchasing Coach Grigg's in depth program on this topic, visit [Complete Program Design for 400/600/800m Athletes](https://www.CompleteTrackandField.com/).

Enter coupon code **GRIGGJR** at checkout and receive a 30% discount on the regular retail price.

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Coach Ron Grigg is a featured clinician at the [Complete Track and Field Summer Clinic](https://www.CompleteTrackandField.com/) and you can learn from him directly by attending this annual event held during the third weekend in July at Harvard University.

[Click here to follow Ron Grigg on Twitter](https://twitter.com).

[Click here to see all of Ron Grigg's articles and videos on CompleteTrackandField.com](https://www.CompleteTrackandField.com/).

Best of luck with your coaching and training.

Regards,

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