



# ATHLETICS COACH

September 2016



# My Coaching Journey

Level 5 Coach **David Davis-Jones** shares the story of his coaching journey and the lessons he has learnt along the way.

**“I remember training with the likes of Ron Clarke, Trevor Vincent, Tony Cook, John Coyle, and Derek Clayton at the Glenhuntly Athletics Club. They were such great blokes...you had to stop and realise that you were actually running with Olympian and World Record Holders.”**

## **The Beginning**

David Davis-Jones's long career in Athletics began as a young athlete, where after winning multiple Tasmanian titles he moved to Victoria to join the famous Glenhuntly club. "I just happened to be living in Heathmont with my Aunt and Uncle, unaware that Clarke lived in Heathmont too." However, it wasn't long until David would trot around to Royal Avenue and meet up with Ron Clarke for their early morning run.

Running alongside the best athletes of the day, David's career flourished and he was offered a scholarship to attend and train in the American College system. After representing Australia at an international level, a repeated achilles injury required surgery cruelly curtailing his advances in middle distance running. While it is all too common to see athletes lost to the sport for good after the disappointment of injury, David's Athletics career was just beginning as he was set to launch a successful career in coaching that would take him back to the pinnacle of the sport.



David's coaching career started in earnest in the early 80's when Trevor Vincent called him to look up a kid by the name of Pat Scammell. Pat had been a promising young junior but his career had stalled after an injury that he obtained falling down a flight of stairs at work. The two trained together through the winter of 1981 in the freezing rain, cold, and mud of Tangambalanga, a small township in Northern Victoria. Understanding how injury can affect a successful athletics career, David was able to offer the right support to Scammell and his performances flourished as a result. The partnership worked so well that Pat broke the 4 minute mark for the mile in 1982 and then made the team for the 1982 Brisbane Commonwealth Games in the 1500m. David was also recognised for his work and named as a National Team Coach.



“I've always believed the difference between good athletes and really good ones is psychological. I can remember one day at the track, Pat Scammell was complaining that he had to compete against Olympic Champions and World Record Holders. He was only 21 years of age! I walked down the track and then turned around and said, “I've just had an idea. The next time you run against Seb and Steve, what about asking them to give you 30 meters start?”  
No reply from Pat - just an intense glare!”



## **Dave's key tips for up and coming coaches:**

- Read as much as you can. I highly recommend Peter Coe's 'Training Distance Runners', and Keith Livingstone's 'Healthy Intelligent Training.'**
- Interact with other coaches - having a mentor is an important ingredient for success**

## **Coaching Philosophy**

"A lot has happened since that phone call so many years ago, and I've often wondered how different things would have been if Trevor had never called" David reflects. Since then, the distance expert has gone on to have coaching roles in the Kenyan, Tanzanian, and Spanish national teams partly due to close friendships with Mike Boit in Kenya and Suleiman Nyambui in Tanzania. In addition, David's Spanish connection was formed when he was coaching some Spanish athletes in Australia who helped him connect with their national association. Notably among them was Paula Gonzales (pictured above), winner of the Spanish Marathon Trial who was cruelly denied an appearance in the 2016 Olympic games due to a spinal injury just five weeks after her success.

The philosophy that has led to such international success has always been based on an athlete-first approach. "I have always thought that the athlete should get something out of the whole running experience. Coming from a background in manufacturing where it was desirable to empower the employees, I have endeavoured to do the same thing with my athletes. Initially, I decide what the athlete does in training but gradually we start to decide together what we do and after a period of time I like the athlete to take charge and start to decide for themselves. Of course, I'm always there for consultation and support. If an athlete makes a mistake, then hopefully they learn the next time." David also sees the relationship between coach and athlete as more important than just the workouts. "Trust the athlete implicitly and they will trust you...then they will tell you how they really feel rather than just telling you what they think you want to hear!"

David's flexible athlete-driven training program has enabled him to support a diverse group of athletes over a long period of time. "Over the years I have had a mini-United Nations of Athletes. At one stage I have had athletes from South Africa, India, Spain, Mauritius, Holland, Ethiopia, Malaysia, and Australia all training together...it made for some interesting conversations!"

In order to get the best out of such a diverse group of athletes, David stresses the most important thing for the coach is to always see the athlete as an individual and to trust them implicitly. There are other little techniques that Davis-Jones like to employ to engage his athletes in good habits off the track.

"All of my athletes have this small note on the fridge that says:

- Stretch when you feel tight,
- Ice if you feel inflammation or swelling,
- Eat well - sometimes you feel like pigging out but balance it out,
- Try and get adequate rest - sleep helps you recover,
- Keep hydrated,
- We have good days and some bad days,
- Running is bloody tough but stay ecstatically happy with what you do,
- If you're feeling overwhelmed then perhaps the balance is out or you need to change something,
- and if on the off chance I haven't picked up on something - tell me!"



## Current Squad

Despite being a proud member of the Sandy Bay Harriers (the oldest club in Tasmania), David's squad includes athletes from all over Tasmania who make the trip to work alongside him.

One of his most promising athletes is Meriem Daoui (pictured below). Despite being only 17 years of age, Meriem was the winner of the Tasmanian Open 10km and 3km on the track this past season. "Meriem is a lovely young Moroccan-born women who is a great believer in her faith" Davis-Jones says. "She runs all her races in her hijab and long pants, but it certainly doesn't slow her down. She is also the Tasmanian Schools Cross Country Champion."

**"Running gives you time to escape from reality, it gives you the feeling of accomplishment; it gives you goals to break and confidence when you break them. Running is the best thing for your health both physically and mentally."**

- Meriem Daoui when asked about the best of running by the Budget FunRun.



Meriem Daoui isn't the only Tasmanian Schools Cross Country champion under David's care, with Biniyam (Bini) Hagos also a regular member of the training group. "Bini was an Australian under age champ a few years ago but then dropped out of athletics. It is very difficult for any athlete to attend school, work to support themselves or their families and be in training." Hagos is one of two athletes to have immigrated from Ethiopia in the squad, alongside the talented Dejen Gebreselassie (pictured below) who finished third in the Open division at the recent Tasmanian Cross Country Championships. "These guys are starting to get some consistency in their lives and have achieved athletic excellence along the way. They drive me a bit crazy at times, but they keep me on my toes too!"

**"I always emphasise to my athletes that school or uni comes first, family and your social life is second, and athletics comes after that"**

David's squad is packed with additional talent including Inessa Corney who is the state Steeplechase champion and Under 20 Cross Country title holder, Edna Rios from Colombia who has had good results in numerous Fun Run's and Isobel, Carla, and Calandra who are currently focussing heavily on their studies. Daniel 'Chess' Clarke winner of state medals over 5km and 10km also assists with the training group.



**"At the end of the day, while I'm always keen for athletes to improve, I'm ultimately more impressed with what they do with themselves as people."**

**I can look back now with considerable pride – Doctors, Lawyers, Psychologists, Physios, I.T. Professionals, Teachers and the like – and so many of them still keep in touch."**

## Coaching Practices - Fartlek

“Fartlek training is generally not carried out in the way that it was intended” argues Davis-Jones. “Fartlek or Speed Play was designed to be a blend of continuous running at varied paces with recovery...and is based on being spontaneous! A Fartlek session involves various severities of oxygen debt. You should do long bursts, short sprints, even jogging whenever you like, but it is unstructured running so you should run how you feel, and do not go out to run a 5 x 300 with some walking or jogging in between.” Davis-Jones also believes that the environment plays an important aspect of Fartlek running and should be considered by the coaches. “The word ‘Loparglagje’ is an important component of Fartlek and translates to the joy of running. It is partly for this reason that I try to have everyone running at different locations, over different surfaces and at different paces.”

## Training Practices - Stretching

Stretching is an aspect of training that has always intrigued the Level 5 Coach. “Some athletes do very little, while others spend half of their workout on it. Jack Pross used to get many of his athletes to do ballet exercises. I’ve tried this over the years, but most of my athletes are reluctant to do them in front of other people...well no problem, I’ve always suggested my athletes stretch at home in front of the TV in down time - they can do the ballet exercises then too!”

**“I always remember something that Ron Clarke once said to me ‘lots of athletes talk about what they want to do, and how they are going to do it, but very few ever finish it off with any degree of efficiency.’ I guess what Ron was saying is that there are a lot of ‘gonna’s’ in this world”**

## Summing Up

“I will finish by telling a story that the great New Zealand 5000m Gold Medallist Murray Halberg told me.

He and another Kiwi Olympian Bill Baillie were running through the rain while training in Brisbane many years ago. At a bus shelter they stopped and facetiously asked an old lady if they were on the right road to Sydney. She glowered at them and replied, “You’re on the right road to the looney bin.” They left her there in the rain laughing her head off Murray said.

They went on running – and as for me, over thirty years there have been far more highs than lows, so I’d do it all over again but with a few adjustments along the way!” 🏃