

TEAM & PARENT HANDBOOK 2026

INTRODUCTION TO THE SPORT:

Cross Country is a team sport. Teams of runners race a 5K course over typically rough terrain faster than other teams. It differs mainly from road running or track running in the course, which may include a combination of grass, mud, trails, sidewalks, roads, hills, woodlands, and water hazards. When scoring, it is the lowest score that wins. Scoring teams consist of seven runners; 5 who score and 2 who displace other runners. The seventh runner is just as important as the first runner on a team. This is why cross country teams are so close, like family. We depend on each other, support each other, and succeed as a team.
Cross Country is also an individual sport. You literally get out of it what you put into it - especially with summer training. In addition to team awards, individuals may also win awards by placing in the top 10 or 20 places in a meet.
Popular abbreviations for Cross Country are XC or CC.

A TRADITION OF EXCELLENCE:

At Lakewood Ranch High School, we have a long **tradition of excellence** in distance running. We encourage athletes of all shapes, sizes, ages, and athletic abilities to try Cross Country. It is a sport unlike any other. The Lakewood Ranch High School Cross Country team is a family where we support and encourage each other and celebrate each runner's improvement and accomplishments. We work hard, running mile after mile on hot afternoons. But, through that hard work, we have fun, pushing each other to improve, and appreciating what each runner brings to the team. Our team's success is due to the hard work and preparation of all the individuals over the summer and then coming together and bonding as a team during the season.

TEAM WEB SITE: http://www.LRHSXC.com

This site contains the schedule, our team Google calendar, important links and news, results, paperwork, fundraisers, an online store for purchasing LRHS XC merchandise, and a way to contact your coach. We will use the SportsYou app for most communication and email through our website (please sign up) as a backup.

MAKING THE TEAM / TRY-OUTS:

We are a "non-cut" team; however, you may be removed from the team for excessive absences, lack of communication, or behavioral issues. This rarely happens because XC athletes are always the smartest students and strive for excellence in all they do! We do ask that you keep your GPA at 3.0 or above. If you fall below 3.0, we will ask you to take time away from the team to get extra help to bring up your grades. If you come to practice every day and work hard, you are on the team.

XC PRACTICE:

We train every day after school, on record days, and on other days off from school, and on Saturday mornings when we do not have a race. Practices will typically last 2 to 2.5 hours. The practice schedule is on http://www.LRHSXC.com. We do practice at various locations, including Adventure Park, Summerfield, LRHS, Celery Fields, and Robinson Preserve.

EXPECTATIONS / CORE VALUES:

- **Respect:** Have respect for yourself, teammates, coaches, parents, family, teachers, and your school. Remember that you represent a lot more than just yourself.
- **Integrity:** Do the right thing. Be trustworthy so you can be trusted to do a workout on your own.
- **Leadership/Service:** Leadership includes serving others. A good leader sets a good example, has a good work ethic, and keeps a positive attitude. A great leader also does things first without being asked, like helping with the tent or cooler rather than telling a freshman to do it.
- **Attend every practice and meet.** If you have a valid reason to be absent or late, please notify your coach 24 hours in advance so you can make up the workout and still be eligible to compete in that week's meet. A set appointment is not a last minute emergency. For girls, please schedule all appointments (and other reasons to miss practice) on Wednesdays or Fridays which are lighter days. We ask that you do not miss Tuesdays and Thursdays as they are the most important workouts of the week. If you need to miss a Monday long run for example, you will need to make that up the day before on Sunday and send a pic of your workout to Coach Rae Ann. If it is a last minute emergency, notify us before practice begins that day. If you need to miss a meet, we need to know at least one (1) week or more prior to the meet.
- **Bring a water bottle and watch or Garmin to every practice and meet.** Please also bring a towel or mat to use for strength and core work and stretching, which are done on the ground. **Please do not share water bottles and when using the team cooler, do not put the water cooler spicket inside your water bottle as that will spread germs.**
- **Wear or bring a T-shirt or tank top to practice and all meets.** Everyone must wear a shirt during all awards ceremonies, meetings, photos, and on any team transportation.
- **Complete all required paperwork and fees:**
  - Athletic clearance and insurance/participation fee online
  - Returning runners - summer training logs
  - Pay the player pack/team fee which covers part of the team expenses such as meet entry fees, awards, snacks, transportation, team activities, and all the team gear you get to keep, like shirts, hoodies, socks, bags, etc.
  - Participate in team fundraisers – see website for details.

XC SEASON:

Cross Country season starts in May with summer training, which lasts until the first day of official practice at the end of July. Our races are 5K which is 5 Kilometers = 5,000 meters = 3.11 miles. Competition season begins at the end of August. Regular season meets are usually Saturday mornings, but we may have some on weekday afternoons/evenings. The Tri-County Championship is usually the last meet for JV runners or those who are not eligible for District. We may take 7-10 runners to District depending on how many we are allowed to run there. The **State Series** starts with the District Championship followed by the Regional Championship, and finishes with the State Finals in Tallahassee. **How we finish as a team at District determines if we advance to Region then how we finish at Region determines if we advance to State.** Specific advancement details are on our team calendar.



INJURIES OR ACHES & PAINS:

It is our goal to prevent injuries through our proper warm up which includes our extensive dynamic warm up (lunges, skipping, glute activation, etc.) and gradual increases in mileage, strengthening exercises, and stretching. If you do have an injury or some unusual aches and pains, please keep your coach informed right away. **Communication is very important.** We do have access to our LRHS athletic trainer, Sydney Suppa, in the training room #618. Always follow all training room rules and tell your coach if you are working with the trainer.

HYDRATION & NUTRITION:

All Cross Country athletes must drink water all day long. Start each day by drinking 12-16 oz. of water right when you get up in the morning and continue to **drink all day** at school. Bring a large, insulated water bottle with you always. Try to drink a sports drink or juice at lunch. If you do not drink regularly throughout the day, you will feel the negative effects of dehydration once you start practice in the hot afternoon. You cannot drink enough right after school to make up for not drinking all day; it just isn't possible. If you are even slightly dehydrated, your body will have to work much harder to do the same workout it did with ease the day before. Stay hydrated and you will feel better and run easier. Your urine should be light yellow in color like the color of lemonade. Dark yellow means you are dehydrated and conversely, clear means you may have flushed out all your electrolytes.

It is extremely important to eat a big healthy breakfast with protein every day. You may find that you need to eat a little lighter at lunch if you feel too full for our hard practices, especially if you have a later lunch period. This is why a bigger breakfast is important. Your afternoon workouts will be challenging so you must fuel your body. A light, easy to digest snack right after school is okay, but please do not eat too much or anything too heavy that takes a long time to digest. You will have discomfort and other issues if you try to run hard on a full stomach. Please be smart about your meals; eat breakfast, lunch, and snacks every day. If the cafeteria does not offer items you like or the line takes too long, bring your own lunch. You will not be able to run well in the afternoon if you skip meals. The cafeteria may offer a free after school snack which you should eat right after school. Please do not wait until practice begins to eat your snack. Please do not eat meat, dairy, or citrus as an after school snack.

After Cross Country practice, it is important to eat something right away to start refueling your muscles. If dinner is not ready right away, please have a small snack such as fruit or veggies with some protein like cheese, meat, sun butter or a nut butter, or cereal with milk is an easy way to get carbs and protein in your pre-dinner snack. After running hard or running in the heat, you might not have much of an appetite, but **the first hour after a workout is the most important time to eat.** That first hour is when you can best refuel your muscles to recover from the day's workout and to prepare your body for the next day. Be creative but just be sure to start refueling right away.

LAKEWOOD RANCH XC

XC EQUIPMENT:

- The equipment needed for Cross Country is minimal - good running shoes, moisture wicking socks (no cotton), sports bra, tank top or t-shirt, shorts or skirt, towel, water bottle, and a watch (a Garmin or other GPS watch is helpful but not required, a simple Timex Ironman watch works).
- You need “synthetic” or “moisture wicking” running socks – NO COTTON. You do not have to spend a lot of money on socks, just be sure they are made of materials such as Coolmax, Dri-Fit, polyester, spandex, or lycra. When you sweat, cotton socks get wet and stay wet, which causes friction and heat in the shoe, and then results in blisters on your toes and feet.
- BODYGLIDE, SportShield, and Aquaphor are products to help prevent chafing from shorts on the inner leg and sports bras as well as blisters. If you already have some chafing or blisters, Aquaphor is a great product to help those areas heal.
- **PLEASE BRING YOUR WATER BOTTLE, TOWEL OR MAT, AND WATCH TO EVERY PRACTICE AND MEET.**
- You must have a water bottle with you all day at school, so bringing it to practice should be no problem. **Please do not share water bottles as this is how sickness spreads and could wipe out the whole team.**
- Please see article on the important links page of our website titled “Care and maintenance of our two most important pieces of equipment” for suggestions to care for your shoes as they get sweaty, muddy, and wet throughout the season.

FUNDRAISERS:

We have several fundraisers set up for various times before and during the season. Please see our website at http://www.lrhsxc.com for complete details. If you have suggestions for fundraisers, please let us know. We are always open to suggestions and always need help from our parents/boosters club.

CROSS COUNTRY SUCCESS:

Success in cross country is simple: show up, do the work, and you will improve. Enjoy this time doing a tough sport that you love with your teammates. Your teammates may become some of your best friends in life. Once you leave high school you may not have another opportunity like this.

MEETS OR RACES:

Will I run in the Varsity or JV race on meet day?

We are one team, the Varsity Cross Country team. Even though we are one team, not every athlete will compete in every single meet. Certain meets or races are only for the top 7-10 runners, depending on the meet. If you are not in the top seven at the beginning of the season, you will have a chance to move into a scoring spot at any time during the season. Most invitational meets will allow 7-10 runners in the "Varsity" race, so everyone else will compete in the "JV" race. In these cases, times from both races will be compared when determining who will be in the top seven at the next meet. ***“The clock never lies.”*** There is no set order on the team and no seniority – any grade level can run varsity and earn a varsity letter. It can change every week depending on how you perform, so keep working hard! Keep in mind that meet entries are submitted/due 1-2 weeks prior to each meet and are at the discretion of the coach. Put in the work to earn the opportunity to race.
Please check our meet schedule on http://www.lrhsxc.com

MEET PROCEDURES:

- All team members are expected to be on time for meets.
- Arrival and warm-up: When we arrive, the team is expected to help set up our team area. The team is expected to assist in carrying team equipment, coolers, tent, tarps, etc.
- Team and parents, please keep shoes off the team tarp so that it stays clean and dry for athletes to sit on to foam roll and stretch. Most of our meets will result in wet/muddy shoes and we need to keep those off the tarp. Thank you.
- All athletes are expected to start the warm on time according to that day's meet warm up time schedule. The schedule is there to minimize your race day stress. Just follow it and you won't be rushed or forget to do anything.
- Cool down and departure: All athletes please wait at the finish line for all teammates to finish then return to team tent together to turn in timing chips and then run the cool down jog together, do any additional running or strength workouts as instructed by the coaches, and then foam roll and stretch before you leave. Everyone on the team is expected to assist in cleaning up, breaking down team area, and carrying equipment back to the cars. It's all a team effort!

AWARDS BANQUET:

Details about the awards banquet will be posted on the team's Google calendar. If anyone would like to host the awards banquet at their house, please contact your coach. If no one wishes to host at their home, we will use the LRHS cafeteria.

AWARDS:

There are many awards that can be earned by anyone on the team: Varsity Letter, Most Valuable Runner (MVR), Coaches Award, Most Improved, Outstanding New Runner, Team Spirit Award, and Unsung Hero to name a few. Only those members of the team with good attendance, work ethic, and a positive attitude are eligible for awards.

HOW TO EARN A VARSITY LETTER:

Attendance at practice and meets with advance communication for conflicts/absences, scoring in a meet, work ethic, meeting the time standard, completing the entire season, a positive attitude, participating in fundraisers, and returning issued equipment all factor in to earning a Varsity letter. Attendance is extremely important. Even if your absences are excused, they are still absences so please keep that in mind. You must compete in a minimum of four (4) meets prior to District to be eligible to race at District and to be eligible for any type of award at our awards banquet – Varsity letter, JV letter, or special plaque awards.

5K Time Standards:

- 20:00 for boys
- 23:00 for girls

THE TEAM IS YOUR FAMILY:

If you run it right, cross country is a testament to suffering. Success in this sport requires pushing your body to the brink of exhaustion, demanding all it's capable of delivering for mile after mile of unforgiving terrain. But you do not suffer alone. **You run as part of something bigger. You run as part of a TEAM in its truest sense.** And that's why, when the pain sets in, you keep running.

No sacrifice, no victory.

YOUR COACHES:

BOYS: Coach Bill Zarrella has been head boys cross country coach since 2019. He is also the head boys track and field coach here at the Ranch. Zarrella brings valuable experience in cross country and indoor and outdoor track. Zarrella coached at the high school level for 8 years in Massachusetts before moving to Florida to pursue a career in Law Enforcement. During his time as a Deputy, Zarrella continued coaching and mentoring AAU athletes. Zarrella retired from the Manatee County Sheriff's Office in 2019 after 22 years..

"Coach Z" brings a seasoned perspective and valuable knowledge. He is excited to continue strengthening the program.

Contact Coach Z: 941-726-0179 or kathi1818@aol.com

GIRLS: Coach Rae Ann Darling Reed began coaching girls cross country at the Ranch in 2022. She is the head girls cross country coach and the girls distance track coach. Darling Reed has coached high school cross country and track since 2001 at schools in Florida and Massachusetts. Darling Reed competed in both cross country and track in high school and college. After graduating from Brown University and the International University of Monaco, she focused on running longer distances. Darling Reed has experience training for and racing distances from 400 meters up to 57 miles. She has completed the Boston Marathon seven times so far. Darling Reed holds the following coaching certifications: USA Track & Field (USATF) Level 2, USATF Cross Country Specialist, USATF Level 1, and Road Runners Club of America (RRCA). In addition to coaching at the high school level, she runs her own business, RunnerGirl Inc., and she coaches adults of all ages, plus works part time as a Fit Expert at Fleet Feet Sarasota.

"Coach Rae Ann" is excited to share her knowledge, experience, and love of running with the Mustangs!

Contact Coach Rae Ann: 941-586-9375 or raeann.darlingreed@gmail.com

SUGGESTED PACKING LIST FOR XC MEETS:

- Wear your uniform and running shoes to the meet so you are ready to start the warm up when you arrive.
- Please arrive 10 minutes earlier than the team arrival time if you need to braid your hair at the race. It always takes longer than you think it will.
- Hair ties
- Extra socks
- Racing shoes
- Plastic bag for wet clothes
- Dry clothes to wear home
- Money for event t-shirt (optional only if you wish to purchase one - usually $25-$40 depending on type of shirt) and any food vendors at the meet (again, optional)
- Water bottle
- Towel
- Garmin or watch (yes you may wear it to race)
- Bug spray
- Sunscreen
- Sandals/slides to wear home
- Hoodie or jacket
- Sweatpants
- Please leave valuables at home.
- Phones should be silenced and put away as our team tent will be left unattended during races and there will be thousands of runners and spectators around the team tent area.
- Post race drinks or snacks if you do not like what is provided.
- Reminder that you must wear a team shirt or uniform top for all award ceremonies, team photos, and any team transportation.
- **For team bus/van travel:**
    - Blanket
    - Pillow
    - Airpods/Headphones/earbuds
    - Phone charger

Success is one step out of your comfort zone.