**Making varsity—it’s every runner’s goal.**

On the high school cross country team, it’s like making the Olympics. Varsity is the pinnacle. You join a select group that trains together, shares tough workouts and takes the line like a family in big meets to carry the banner for your school.
Since the varsity unit has only seven runners, the path from junior varsity—the bane of many a young athlete—to cross country’s version of the Navy Seals must be understood to be mastered. As New Jersey track and cross country coach Brian Gould of West Windsor-Plainsboro North says, “Everybody who’s successful trains hard.”

Gould’s point is two-fold. If you want to make varsity, you’d better train hard. But since all varsity aspirants train hard, how can you rise to the top?

**JV Lesson #1: Run Consistent Mileage**

“Consistency,” says Foot Locker national finalist Quintin McKinnish of Tennessee, who will be entering his senior year at Morristown West in the fall. When McKinnish came out for cross country as a freshman, he joined a squad that was defending state 3A champion. “Every team member preached consistency.” McKinnish heeded the advice of his older and more experienced teammates and with his talent made varsity as a freshman. He noticed a pattern. “The runners who trained five days a week and not on weekends, they were not in the game after a year or so. They might improve as freshmen, but after that five days a week was not going to cut it.”

**JV Lesson #2: Say Yes to ‘Peripherals,’ No to Shortcuts**

McKinnish learned that he had to run virtually every day to keep up. Eventually, he became the team’s top runner. Currently, he takes a day off no more than once a month. McKinnish says that while West coach Ray Farmer emphasizes consistency, he also tells the runners that to contend for a varsity spot they need to do the “peripherals,” like core work and eating with good nutrition in mind. You want to make varsity? No shortcuts!

**JV Lesson #3: Find Teammate Role Models**

On one level, following a varsity formula is clear cut. Gould, who coached superstar twins Joe and Jim Rosa (both competed at Stanford), suggests, “Find an upperclassman who’s good and do what they do.” Nine times out of 10, says Gould, if an athlete has any talent, they’ll see progress quickly. Others need to be patient and give it more time.
Gould says that the Rosas themselves had an excellent teammate role model in Tyler Corkedale, who was two years older. Corkedale ran a pedestrian 5:25 1600m as a freshman. He trained hard and, says Gould, “When his body caught up to his heart, everything came together.” Corkedale started excelling as a junior, when the Rosas were freshmen. “If you ask Jim and Joe,” says Gould, “it was how Tyler carried himself that taught them how to train hard.”
Not only did the Rosas capture the national limelight, but Corkedale himself improved to the point of getting an athletic scholarship to Penn State, where he ran a 3:45 1500m, equivalent to
a 4:03 mile. From their early strides, the Rosas never considered themselves “JV” runners. Their first sport was swimming, and they entered high school with some fitness; but more than that, their attitude was, “We’re good. We’re varsity.”

**JV Lesson #4: Ditch the JV Mindset**

Don’t let yourself get mired in a JV mindset. Always reach higher in workouts, even if your coach enters you in JV races. It’s not the label that matters but your attitude and effort. Think of JV as varsity understudy: You’re always ready to move up to the big leagues if the team needs you. Suppose a varsity runner is sick or injured or just needs a day off. If you’ve been shining in training, you may the one chosen by the coach to take a varsity slot.
At Albuquerque Academy in New Mexico **(!),** track and cross country coach Adam Kedge gives JV runners extra impetus to move up. He creates a kind of Triple A grouping of minor leaguers who are brought up to the majors—varsity, that is—at secondary meets that the Chargers can expect to win even when not at full strength.
Instead of having the varsity run certain lower caliber meets as workouts like some top teams do, Academy replaces three or four varsity runners with JV youngsters. They learn the ropes, bond with superior teammates and feel they are contributing to varsity success. Kedge, whose Academy teams have won 11 state 4A cross country titles and made five Nike Cross Nationals (NXN) appearances, says this system motivates the JV athletes to work hard and always be ready for a varsity opportunity.
Many teams have similar situations in which JV runners will be given varsity experience on a selective basis. For example, seniors on the varsity usually have to miss at least one/two meets with the varsity resting or because of conflicts with SAT exams.

**JV Lesson #5: Be a Responsible Athlete**

Ask your coach about varsity opportunities that come up, and make the coach aware of your interest. Being chosen for varsity is not only based on fitness level and previous performances but also on maturity and how you handle yourself as a responsible athlete. Are you the type of runner who can follow the coach’s instructions on strategy and teamwork in varsity competition? You won’t be in the portajohn when the race is called to the line, will you?
Just as you should try and free yourself from a JV mindset, you should realize that varsity spots are not permanent. There are always weaknesses in a seven- runner varsity lineup; runners move up, and down, as meets come and go.
It happened that way with two recent Academy stars, Jefferson Rieder and Alex Herring, both now running in college. They were mid-to-low JV runners but hard workers whose commitment never wavered. One day before a meet, Kedge pulled them aside and, like a stage director at a Broadway show, told them, “You’re on!”
The two understudies ended up outrunning the varsity boys they subbed for and went on to spark state championship teams and national qualifiers**.** And like New Jersey’s Corkedale, Reider now is on the verge of a sub-4:00 mile with a 3:45 1500m at the University of New Mexico.

**JV Lesson #6: Know Your Team’s Moving-Up System**Also, be aware of the varsity entry points on your team. Has the coach explained exactly how JV runners can show the promise of varsity? Are there certain meets that will count most in assessing performance? Which JV goals serve as springboards to varsity consideration?
In New Hampshire, coach Jim Eakin of Hanover High gave every team member the feeling of riding a ladder of success. Eakin, just retired after coaching boys and girls cross country for 36 years—producing 23 state team champions, and another 23 individual champions—is proud of “never having a star system.”
For Hanover runners, the state’s JV championship was almost as big a deal as the varsity state meet. Marauder runners trained with a top-14 finish in mind, the team’s gold standard. While every state may not have a statewide JV meet, just about every league and conference has some version of a JV “championship.” Use those events as motivation and opportunity. Study the course, check out the competition and be ready for your “Olympic trials.”
Who knows, maybe your superior JV performance will be a varsity stepping stone!

**JV Lesson #7: Use a Big Summer for Big Breakthroughs**

Without a star system, Hanover produced plenty of stars by respecting the JV talent. One was Aaron Watanabe, who started out as ninth man on the JV as a freshman. He moved up to No. 3 on the JV as a sophomore. Following Eakin’s dictates, Watanabe put in a big summer leading into his 2009 junior season. And he made one of the most startling breakthroughs you’ll ever see—from No. 3 JV runner to state titlist. Then, as a senior, Watanabe ran an 8:59 3200m. He went on to Harvard.

Almost every team has some version of Watanabe’s rags-to-riches story. Last fall, at the NXN championship in Portland, Ore., national power St. Xavier boys of Cincinnati, which placed ninth, was led by senior Alex Kuvin. Kuvin had made steady progress from the JV ranks since sophomore year when, in the words of Bombers’ coach Mike Dehring, “He couldn’t break 11 minutes for 2 miles.”

Kuvin could have been a poster boy for JV runners everywhere. He was young, inexperienced and felt somewhat left out. But he came to embrace a simple but powerful idea. “Alex finally realized, ‘If I actually do the work over the summer, maybe I can be pretty good,’” Dehring says. By last fall, Kuvin had worked his way to No. 4 man on the Ohio State Division I championship team, running 15:55 for 5K, and then to No. 2 man for St. Xavier in the NXN Midwest Regional. Last spring he ran a 9:17 3200m and will run in college at the University of Dayton.

St. Xavier, an all-boys school, puts a lot of stock in an afternoon “retreat” for juniors and seniors on campus prior to summer training. Dehring and the boys discuss teamwork and leadership and how to engage the newer runners with team values and aspirations of excellence. Dehring says, “It can be as simple as, ‘I am a senior. I will learn every freshman’s name.’”

**JV Lesson #8: Don’t Be Shy, Learn All You Can**

Newer, developing runners can turn the tables on that idea. Most teams have some form of “retreat” like ice-breakers or training camps, gatherings with everyone present as a springboard to the season. JV youngsters should learn the name of at least one varsity teammate. Even if he or she seems aloof, approach the older runner, say hello, make a friend. Before long, you’ll be picking up tips while gaining confidence and maturity.
This is what transpired at University High in Morgantown, W.V., but not how you might think. As a freshman, Millie Paladino got to know an older teammate in her junior year and they became good friends. In a role reversal, it was Paladino who became a top performer and helped the junior. The older girl felt stuck in JV and questioned her running future. “She thought that she would be on JV for the rest of her life,” Paladino says.

**JV Lesson #9: Lean on Running Buddies for Support**

While only a freshman, Paladino had the maturity to counsel her friend. They would talk about goals on training runs. They would reinforce the need for hard work. Paladino told her friend to relax and be patient. “It’s hard to put in summer mileage,” says Paladino, who went on to become a state champion and a Foot Locker finalist, “if you don’t believe, ‘OK, this is worth it because eventually I’ll reach the point where I want to be.’”

**JV Lesson #10: Improvements Are Within All Runners’ Reach**

The next fall, as a senior, Paladino’s friend made varsity, contributing to University’s second- place performance in the state 3A championship. And, in Paladino’s words, the girl “developed a love of running and is now on a college team.”
But Paladino’s job was not over. She is entering her senior year this fall and will have the honor of captaining the Hawks’ cross country team. Bring on the JV.