

A suggested plan for structuring youth club track & field practice in the Covid-19 era

Though “return to practice” is allowed in most states and facilities are opening up, there are probably 50 different plans, phases, and sets of restrictions, one or more per state. Some municipalities or facilities may have even more restrictive policies; for example, Boston has a slower opening with more restrictive group gathering sizes than the state of Massachusetts.

The following plan was developed by the Waltham (Massachusetts) Track Club under early Massachusetts state regulations

- Group sizes including coach(es) were limited to 10 total individuals
- Those groups – cohorts – must remain exclusive for both athletes and coaches through the entire season – no moving of athletes or coaches among groups.
- Individuals in groups maintain 6’ minimum distancing
- Facility access has maximum group size, but a facility may have multiple groups on the facility “surface” if set up with 20’ between groups limitations to prevent overlapping groups
- All equipment requires sanitizing between use
- Hand and equipment sanitizer available at all sessions.
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What follows is scaleable for both participant numbers and facility size.

With competitions effectively shut for the season and other youth team sport activities slow to return to operations, track and field may be one the few opportunities available. The purposes of and changes to the season’s club were conveyed to parents of past participants. The club noted approximately 50% return participation from prior years, roughly 260 to 125.

Practice purposes are 1) engagement with the sport, 2) emphasis on basic skill building, 3) active recreation, and 4) socialization. There will be little competition-focused practice. Parents were also given operating rules and expectations for practices which included potential actions for not adhering to rules.

Practice session length was shortened from almost 2 hours in 2019 to 1 hour in 2020 to accommodate needing larger numbers of smaller sized cohorts. This set-up requires a consistent attendance by coaches for their cohort, and increased facility access times. Shorter practices was not a reason for non-participation, as parents welcomed the opportunity for structured activity in a safe environment. Practice dates increased from 3 nights a week servicing up to 260 youth in 2 hour sessions to 5 nights a week for about 120 youth able to attend twice a week in 1 hour sessions.

While the maximum size of cohorts in MA recently increased from 12 and planned to go to 25, the club retains the original 10 person group size to maintain the cohort / coach accountability vs restructuring all cohorts after the start of the season.

The club only considers a limited combining of small cohorts on nights with low attendance, but those combinations are documented, limited (A only with B, C only with D) and they remain the same through the season.

After determining overall club interest, cohorts were created by age group (age 8-10, 11-12, 13-14), with 27 to 45 youth assigned to 3 to 5 cohorts of up to 9 athletes plus a coach for each night's session. The cohorts were assigned to specific evenings. The coach moves around with each cohort attending a session.

Set Up

Each individual at a session is assigned a station number identified by numbers on signs and cones. Those stations, 10 feet apart, are set up each evening. (See diagram) The infield is divided into group quadrants, with groups lined up on the infield along each straightaway – 2 groups per side (A/B South side, C/D North side) separated by 20' – with a possible fifth cohort along the east end zone line. Numbering can be Letter-Number (A-1, A-2..) or unique number to avoid confusion (A has 1 to 9, B has 11-19, C has 21-29, D has 31-39)

Multiple isolated activity areas at least 20 meters apart are set up each evening, though not all are used in each session. These include two sprint / stride start areas (at start of the two straights, no block), 1 or 2 long jumps (no shared runways or pits), shot put (outside fenced track), and turbo/aero jav (infield).

Equipment

- Each shot and jav is numbered.
- An individual uses that same numbered implement for their activity. They must retrieve their own implement
- One rake is used per activity block
- At the end of an activity block, implements and rakes used are brought to a specific location for sanitization using a spray and air dried.
- A fresh set of implements and rake are used for additional activity blocks. The club is fortunate to have acquired enough equipment over years to service multiple blocks in an evening.

Operations

Arrival is requested 5 minutes before session starting time.

Parents are requested to attend their child's session, and to not bring siblings. Parents as spectators must wear a mask. Adequate grandstand seating allows proper spacing.

Boys and girls have separate entrances to the track for check-in for the evening, and then proceed to their assigned station. Masks are worn except for times of 12 foot distancing as determined by the coach. Coaches must wear a face covering at all times.

Group warm-up drills are led by the head coach from the center of the field using a loud speaker, with participants starting at track edge and running toward midfield cones/flagging, then returning. To retain spacing, drills run alternate odd/even stations. (With small groups and large fields, spacing can be larger and all can do warm-up at the same time)

Following warm-up, athletes proceed to an activity area as a group, walking similar to gymnastic teams moving through rotations. Participation includes 2 or 3 activity blocks of 15 to 20 minutes each evening. The Head Coach announces end of a block, and coaches lead their cohort the next activity. Following activity blocks, groups return to their infield station area for stretch / cool down supervised by the cohort coach.

Dismissal is announced with adequate time for departure of the track before the next session enters.

For example, a session may be

6:00-6:20 - warm up and exercises

6:20 - 6:35 **Group A** at 100 start for starts/sprints **Group B** to 1500 start for starts/sprints
Group C to shot, **Group D** to Jav;

6:35 - 6:50 – **Group A** goes to shot; **Group B** goes to east side LJ

Group C to Jav; **Group D** to 100 start

6:50 - 7:00 group circle abs & stretch & get to each other

If a club has fewer participants or a larger facility, or only one session a night, they can add more rotations or activity blocks. The key factor is the organization and structure to keep safety the priority.

An added activity can be a 4 x 100 shuttle sprint relay in alternate lanes, or, allowing more participation, on the infield running football goal line to goal line.

Comments from parents and participants are positive with regard to the smaller cohort size – kids stay more active / less waiting, and allows more individualized instruction. This procedure has worked well and has resulted in no dismissals in the 5 practice weeks to date. The participants recognize and appreciate this ‘special’ activity vs other sports.

In closing, the biggest challenges for youth practices are

Adequate time and people for set up

Coaches committed to work the same sessions each week.

Efficient movement through activities for scheduling

Buy-in by the parents as to policies and procedures

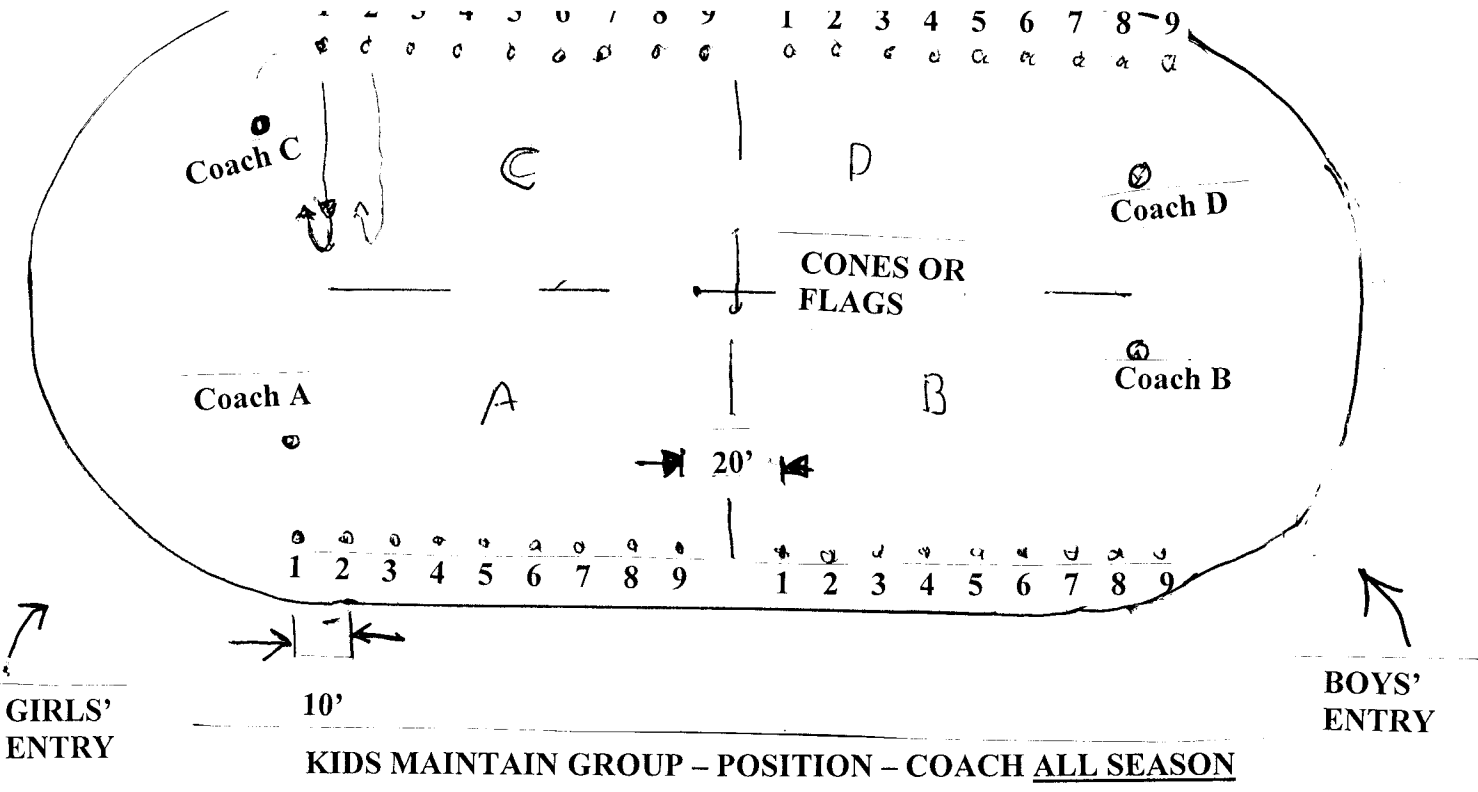
The process above offers a safe environment, and if followed, presents track & field as a well organized and structured activity when other sports may not be as careful or organized. This only serves to create good relations with the community and facility management.

To answer questions parents may have about returning to sport practice, The Aspen Institute has produced a series of Zoom presentations and printable documents over the past several months on youth sports during Covid-19 times.

The most recent document is “Return to Organized Sport - 8 Questions Families Can Ask About Covid-19 Safety”

assets.aspeninstitute.org/content/uploads/2020/07/Return-to-Organized-Sports-8-Questions_Final.pdf

It is a document well worth having available on USATF and club websites, and to distribute to parents having questions about sport participation. .



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