

Talk Title: *Beyond the Finish Line: Coaching for Confidence, Focus, and Growth*

Audience: Cross Country & Track Coaches

Time: 2:05 p.m. (XC) and 3:10 p.m. (T&F)

1. Title Slide

- Title: *Beyond the Finish Line: Coaching for Confidence, Focus, and Growth*
- Name, credentials, HITE EQ affiliation
- Quick intro: Olympian → I/O → Sport psychologist

2. My Athlete Journey

- Brief timeline from youth athlete → Rice → GB Olympian (2016 Steeplechase)

3. What Today's Athletes Are Navigating

- Increased **emotional reactivity**
 - linked to developmental shifts, technology, and cultural norms
- Athletes today are more:
 - Open emotionally, but often without tools to regulate
 - Driven, but also *hyper-aware* of others' opinions
 - Tied to identity through **social comparison** (Strava, Instagram, rankings, etc.)
- Runners struggle with:
 - All-or-nothing thinking ("PR or failure")
 - Identity foreclosure ("I am my performance")
 - Self-criticism and perfectionism masked as ambition

4. Sport Psych 101

- Definition: the study of how psychological factors affect performance and how participation in sport affects psychological development
- Strength training for the mind
- Misconception: "It's 90% mental" → Reality: it's 5%, but that 5% directs the rest
- Key challenges in HS distance athletes:
 - Pre-race anxiety → physiological symptoms
 - Mental fatigue over long seasons
 - Difficulty bouncing back after poor races

5. Facing Adversity: Grit & Response

- $E + R = O$ framework (Event + Response = Outcome)
 - Not everything is in your control—but your *response* always is
- Reframing = cognitive flexibility = resilience
- Adversity as a skill-building opportunity:
 - Teach athletes to evaluate: “What does this moment teach me?”
 - Normalize failure as part of growth
 - Create language around effort: “resilience reps,” “mental muscle”

6. Under Pressure: Training the Zone

- IZOF (Individual Zone of Optimal Functioning)
 - Optimal performance happens within a specific arousal window
 - Too relaxed = low intensity, poor focus
 - Too anxious = cognitive interference, tight muscles, narrowed attention
- Tools to train zone control:
 - **Pre-race reset routines** (music, visualization, breath cue)
 - **Somatic awareness**: where do I hold tension?
 - **Focus refocus drills** in practice (e.g., distractor + task recovery)
- Coaches can:
 - Normalize nerves as useful
 - Help athletes differentiate adrenaline from anxiety

7. Self-Awareness & Identity

- Self-awareness = recognizing your emotional, physical, and cognitive state in real time
- Teach emotional granularity:
 - “Tired” vs. “drained” vs. “unmotivated” = different needs
- Identity work:
 - Who am I beyond the stopwatch?
 - Performance is not a measure of self-worth
- Watch for athlete self-talk:
 - “I suck” → identity distortions
 - “I’m frustrated I didn’t pace better” → behavior distortions

8. Mindset Matters

- Growth vs. Fixed Mindset
 - Emphasize effort, strategy, and feedback vs. innate talent
- Thought traps: catastrophizing (“I blew the whole race”), black-and-white thinking
- Confidence as a skill:
 - Built through reps of positive reinforcement, reflection, and mastery
 - Coaches can shape confidence through:
 - Clear expectations
 - Mistake recovery modeling
 - Language (e.g., “I noticed you regrouped fast”)

9. Sustainable Athletes

- The “Other 22 Hours”: what athletes do off the track affects mental resilience
 - Sleep hygiene: cognitive fog, increased injury risk when under-recovered
 - Nutrition and hydration: blood sugar stability impacts emotion regulation
 - Tech boundaries: screen time before bed → sleep disruption → mood instability
- Encourage:
 - Journal reflection
 - Visualization or breathing habits
 - Balanced self-image (student + sibling + athlete, etc.)

10. Coaching Integration

- Mental training habits during physical training
 - 3-min mental check-ins
 - Post-workout reflection (What did you learn about yourself today?)
 - Embedded breathwork after drills
 - Set intentions for practice
 - Set goals individual-level and team-level
- Model what you want to see:
 - If you reset after a meet mishap, so will your athletes
 - Your response to athlete failure can be formative for your team

11. Final Slide: Coach Impact

- Athletes remember how they felt more than they remember the actual workout

- You don't need to be a sport psych to train the mind
- Tie to central theme
 - You coach "beyond the finish line" by Inviting reflection and encouraging/reframing failure as part of the journey