



# **River Oak Christian Academy**

## **Cross Country**

*Parent & Runner Handbook*

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# Core Values

## Sacrifice

The best things in life ask something of us and require that we give more than what is comfortable. We show up when we would rather not, work through what is hard, and put our team ahead of ourselves by encouraging those who are struggling and celebrating those who are succeeding. Putting aside what is easy and comfortable for the sake of something greater and for the sake of others is sacrifice, and that is the expectation for each person on this team.

*"Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others."* Philippians 2:3-4

*"Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for human masters."*  
Colossians 3:23

## Grow

God uses discipline and effort to shape who we are becoming. We are here to learn how to use our bodies to good effect, to learn to increase our capacities and to grow in our understanding of how this can serve as a means of physical, personal and spiritual growth. We aim to trust the process of this discipline and to be faithful to it so that we might grow as runners and as individuals.

*"No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it."* Hebrews 12:11

## Enjoy

Cross country is hard and it is good, so as we train and compete, we take joy in the gains we are making, celebrate those around us as they grow and progress, and recognize this opportunity is a good gift from the Lord. While this is certainly a difficult task we are undertaking, it is meant for good, so we ought to take great joy in it.

*"This is the day that the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it."* Psalm 118:24

*"It is appropriate for a person to eat, to drink and to find satisfaction in their toilsome labor under the sun during the few days of life God has given them — for this is their lot. Moreover, when God gives someone wealth and possessions, and the ability to enjoy them, to accept their lot and be happy in their toil — this is a gift of God. They seldom reflect on the days of their life, because God keeps them occupied with gladness of heart."* Ecclesiastes 5:18-20

# Team Expectations

**As a member of this team, each student will:**

- Show up on time and ready to work.
- Give their best effort at every practice and every meet. Trying hard is not optional.
- Encourage their teammates, especially those who are struggling, and celebrate those who are succeeding.
- Respect coaches, officials, competitors, and each other.
- Race every meet if at all possible. This is a team, and the team needs every runner.
- Be honest about pain and injuries by telling a coach before workouts and races if there is pain or any other difficulties.
- Represent this team and this school well, at practices, at meets, and everywhere else.

## Season Timeline

Phase	Dates	Schedule
Pre-Season Kickoff	Saturday, June 13	Single event, 9:00 AM - 2:00 PM
Summer Practices	Starting June 22	2 evenings per week + optional Saturday
Race Season	School start - ~October 20	1 practice per week + weekly meets + optional Saturday

### Pre-Season Kickoff Event

The kickoff event on June 13 sets the tone for the entire season. This is a team event, not a parent meeting. Parents are welcome to attend and observe, but the day is built for the runners.

The day will include introductions and an overview of the season, a teaching block on running form and effort levels, the team's first run together, a guest speaker, lunch, a fun active session, and a wrap-up covering summer expectations and the practice schedule.

### Summer Practices

Summer practices are held in the evening, twice per week (Monday and Thursday), with an optional Saturday session. The focus is on building base fitness, learning how to run properly, and establishing team culture. Practices run 45-60 minutes.

Summer attendance is very strongly encouraged. The fitness built during the summer is the foundation for the entire race season.

## Race Season

When school starts, the schedule shifts. The team practices once per week (Monday) and races weekly. Meets are primarily on Wednesdays, with occasional Tuesday and Saturday meets. Start times are 4:30 PM and 5:00 PM, and which group races first alternates each meet.

The team will arrive at meet locations by approximately 3:25 PM for warmup, a course walkthrough, and pre-race preparation. Detailed meet logistics will be communicated weekly during the season.

Optional practices will typically be scheduled on Thursdays or Saturdays during meet weeks. These optional practices are always lower effort and will never fall the day before a meet.

## Post-Season Celebration

Shortly after the season concludes, we will gather to celebrate all that we've accomplished by eating pizza, acknowledging those who have exemplified our Core Values to the greatest degree, as well as those with remarkable running performances.

## Practice Structure

Most practices follow the same general structure, so runners know what to expect.

- **Warmup (10 minutes).** An easy jog followed by a dynamic warmup routine. The team will learn a consistent set of movements early in the summer and be expected to know them. No static stretching before running.
- **Teaching Moment (5 minutes).** One focused topic per practice. Topics rotate throughout the season and include running form, pacing strategy, breathing, race tactics, hydration, nutrition, and how team scoring works.
- **Main Workout (30-35 minutes).** The core of practice, rotating across different types of workouts described below.
- **Strides (5 minutes).** Short sprints (70-100 meters) at faster than race pace, with full recovery between each. These are controlled and smooth, not all-out sprints. They improve speed, mechanics, and teach runners how to change gears during a race.
- **Cooldown (5 minutes).** Easy jog and stretching.

## Effort Levels

Runners will learn these five effort levels and be expected to self-regulate throughout the season:

1. **Walking.** No running effort at all.
2. **Easy.** You could talk to a friend the whole time without stopping. This is warmup, cooldown, and recovery pace.
3. **Steady.** You can still talk, but you would rather not have a long conversation.
4. **Hard.** You can get out a few words but that is it. This is race effort and tempo effort.
5. **Sprint.** You cannot talk. This is finishing kick, strides, and short bursts only.

## Workout Overview

Main workouts fall into four categories. Training leans heavily toward aerobic development, which is what matters most at this age.

- **Build Endurance.** Going longer than runners think they can. Walking is acceptable and expected for many runners, especially early in the season. Progressive distance runs, out-and-back efforts, run/walk intervals, and adventure runs on new routes.
- **Run Real Courses.** Building familiarity and confidence on actual race terrain. Walkthroughs, simulated race starts and running meet courses at varying efforts.
- **Hard Work That Feels Like Fun.** Runners are working hard but the structure keeps it enjoyable. Relay races, capture-the-flag variants, tag games, and scavenger runs.
- **Push Your Limits.** Hard effort days where runners discover they can do more than they thought. Interval repeats, hill repeats, time trials, progressive runs. Used less frequently than other categories.

The core principle across all workouts: getting runners to the right distances matters more than anything else. If a runner cannot complete 1.5 miles running, the priority is building toward that distance through a mix of running and walking. Typically, everyone runs the same distance at their own pace. Speed and intensity come after a runner can cover the distance.

# Meet Day

## What to Expect

The team gathers at the meet location by approximately 3:25 PM. From there, the routine is:

- **Team Gathering (3:25-4:00 PM).** Check in, settle into the team area, walk part of the course led by team captains or medalists, and complete a light warmup jog and dynamic stretching.
- **Pre-Race Gathering (4:00-4:15 PM).** Brief words from the coach and captains.
- **Racing (4:30 and 5:00 PM).** Two races per meet.
- **Post-Race Team Gathering.** Team debrief, 1-2 per-meet awards announced, and snacks and drinks provided by parent volunteers.
- **Race Awards:** Individual and Team Awards are presented by the race hosts, typically 10-20 minutes after the last runner finishes in the second race of the day.

## What Runners Should Bring to Meets

Runners should bring running shoes, water, River Oak jersey, weather-appropriate clothing, personal snacks, and weather aids (to keep cool / stay warm).

## Meet Day Volunteers

Parent volunteers provide snacks and drinks for the team after each meet. A rotation will be set up before the season begins so each family knows their assigned meet.

## Team Scoring

Cross country is a team sport, and the team score is the sum of the top five runners' finishing places. The lowest team score wins. If your top five runners finish 2nd, 5th, 8th, 12th, and 15th, your team score is 42.

Only the top five runners' places count toward the score, but every runner on the team still plays a role. Runners outside the top five push their teammates in practice, and in a race, every place a teammate finishes ahead of an opponent's scoring runner changes the math. A team where every runner is working to improve is a team that wins more meets.

This will be taught early in the season and reinforced throughout. Once meet results start coming in, the team will use real examples from their own races to understand how it works.

# Individual Season Goals

Early in the season, each runner will set a personal goal with help from the coach. Goals can be time-based, effort-based, or milestone-based. Examples include running the full course without walking, beating a specific time, or improving place finish across meets. Goals will be revisited mid-season and adjusted if needed, and goal achievement will be recognized at the end-of-season celebration.

# Team Captains

Team captains are selected by team vote after approximately one month of practices. Before the vote, the coach will define what the team should look for in a captain: consistent attendance and effort, a positive attitude toward teammates, willingness to encourage others (especially younger or slower runners), and modeling the kind of teammate everyone should want to be.

Captains help lead warmups, gather the team when called, encourage teammates during workouts and races, and help lead course walkthroughs at meets.

# Awards and Recognition

## Per-Meet Awards

After every meet, the coach selects 1-2 runners to receive a per-meet award. The criteria rotate: effort, most improved, sportsmanship, grit, teamwork. While anyone can win these awards, these awards are deliberately used to recognize runners who may not be winning league medals but are demonstrating our core values. The award includes a fun snack or drink and a certificate.

## End of Season Awards

An end-of-season celebration will include season-long awards for performance and demonstration of core values.

# Weather & Safety

The coach will monitor the heat index and weather conditions on all practice and meet days.

- **Under 90°F heat index:** Normal practice.
- **90-95°F:** Shortened and / or lower intensity practice with extra water breaks and shaded routes preferred.
- **95°F and above:** Practice moves indoors or is canceled.

- **Lightning / Strong Storms:** Practice moves indoors or is canceled.

Typically, water will be available in a large water cooler, but it is best for students to bring their own water bottles, as well.

## **General Safety**

Emergency contact and medical information will be collected for every runner before the first practice and physicals will be required prior to the first practice. Coaches will be aware of asthma, allergies, and any other relevant conditions. A first aid kit and a phone will be accessible at all practices and meets.