

# THE INTANGIBLES OF A NATIONAL CHAMPIONSHIP SEASON

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## **Introduction:**

### **The Intangibles of a National Championship Season**

Grace Stiles

After recognizing that several TeamBuildr customers had recently won National Championships in the 2023 Fall season, I decided to reach out to the performance coaches who worked alongside those athletes. I refrained from giving them any specific direction on what to write, but rather let them share any insights from the memorable seasons they had. The biggest takeaway is that they all highlighted the power of team culture.

Although talent acquisition, workout programming, and team tactics are important to winning, the most critical factor in attaining a National Championship is undeniably team culture. The commodore between coaches, teammates, and staff is what separates them from the competition, powering them through early morning lifts, grueling practices, and intense games.

Team culture is the intangible force that can make or break a team's success. It encompasses the shared values, beliefs, and behaviors that unite individuals toward a common goal. A strong team culture fosters trust, communication, and collaboration among team members, leading to enhanced cohesion and synergy. It creates an environment where everyone feels valued, supported, and motivated to give their best effort.

Additionally, a positive team culture improves morale, resilience, and adaptability, enabling teams to overcome challenges and setbacks more effectively. Ultimately, cultivating a healthy team culture is not just about winning games or achieving objectives; it's about building a community where individuals thrive and collectively achieve greatness.

## Chapter 1:

### **Legos: How a Classic Children's Toy Helped Build a Championship Program**

Phillip Wiltshire

There is only one door that leads to the basement of our athletics building. That door is a behemoth of steel, and it seems better suited for a submarine rather than a college. Through that door awaits a closed-off stairwell where you can smell the cleaning supplies used at all times, some sort of strange mixture of Pine Sol and bleach. Through a matching steel door and around the corner is the location of the weight room that we refer to as 'The Dungeon'. This 35' by 68' room is where the Cortland Football Team trains on a regular basis. Each dumbbell, squat rack, and bench has served as a tool for the betterment of Red Dragons for years. Chances are that your local high school has a more updated and plentiful location to train. Now that I have you all imagining what it's like to work out in a room that often becomes so steamy during a session that the mirrors fog up, I can get to the point of something that made this season different; something that I truly believe helped to build the championship culture at a time where most people didn't think that was even in the realm of possibilities. Of course, I'm talking about the vintage, and ever-popular, Legos.

As coaches, we are all constantly searching for a way to motivate our athletes and create an environment that's conducive to learning and growth. I'm not sure when the idea came to me, but I wanted a tangible way for the athletes to see how each session built upon the last one and be able to see the accumulation of all the training they were about to embark on during the spring semester. The winter months can be brutal when you're rolling into a workout before the sun peaks out while you slip and slide your way down campus to get to the weight room. This thought process led me to a toy that I absolutely loved as a child: Lincoln Logs.

After about thirty seconds with that thought and realizing that I was silly to think of those, I shifted to Legos, well Lego knockoffs. Have you seen the price of Legos these days!? That was not in the budget. These knockoff plastic building blocks allowed us to include some additional details that made this whole idea more 'Cortland'. I purchased 320 red blocks and a white square base to put the blocks on from Amazon to use as our 'build'. Through the miracle of being an Amazon Prime member, the whole setup arrived at my doorstep two short days later.

Now onto my thought process to make this idea come to fruition. How should we distribute the bricks, what should we require the athletes to do to get a brick, how can those things be measured to remove as much subjectivity as we can from the process as a whole? Firstly, we decided that each lifting group should be able to get a brick at each lift. Remember the size of 'The Dungeon'? Yes...that means we need to run seven or more lift groups each day to provide each athlete on the football team the chance to lift without overcrowding the weight room. We also applied this same thought process to our morning sprint/Change of Direction/conditioning sessions as we hold multiple sections of those as well.

Next, we had to decide on the requirements that each group needed to achieve to receive the brick for that session. The easy one to start with was that the entire lift group needed to be on time and ready to lift before their lift group was scheduled to start. Each group was required to create a chat, exchange numbers, or have a way to communicate with each member after the first day. They were then instructed that they should call and message each other if someone was not there as we were getting close to the scheduled group's lift time. The more they can hold each other accountable, the more that they will take ownership of their own group. Secondly, we wanted to have a high level of effort, energy, and support. This was tougher to measure. What we came up with was to measure 'touches'. We defined 'touches' as spotting for others, high fives/daps/fist bumps, and cheering or vocal support. We picked an arbitrary number of 50 as our requirement. Lastly, we included the cleanliness of the weight room at the conclusion of the lift as the final requirement to earn a brick. This provided the team with simple, concise, and clear expectations for how to earn their brick each day.

At the end of each session, the lift group was informed if they received the brick for that day or not. The reasoning for earning, or missing out, on the brick was communicated to the group before they left. A suggestion to improve was also communicated if the brick was not earned that day. The last order of business was to hand out the brick. Early in the semester, we awarded the brick to those who clearly put in work over the break or offseason. Later, we gave the brick to someone who worked the hardest or was the most vocal and supportive during the lift that day. This cycled back to the original goals of the bricks and awarded the behavior that we were looking to elicit in each group. It amazed me how much the group would hype up their teammate who got to place the brick each day. Watching the athletes cheer each other on and light up when they earned the brick for the day, told me early on that we were on to something.

The final task was to figure out what we were going to build with all the bricks that they earned. The theme revolved around the thought process that we were building a championship team and culture. At first, we thought about building a wall. We didn't like the message of building walls, so we settled on building a 'C'. Since the bricks were already in Cortland State's colors of red and black, it made sense to build the 'C' as a representation of building our school as a whole. I even took this same process to a local high school where I run summer training programs, and we built a 'T'. Coincidentally, this school (Tully) has the same colors as Cortland so it was easy to modify what we did at Cortland and bring it to Tully. A peek behind the curtain for this year, we are building steps. The theme has changed from building a championship program to 'step-up'. While many all-time great players have left the program, our hope is with this step-up mentality that our remaining players will take advantage of the opportunity ahead of them.

Overall, I believe that there were many reasons that these small plastic building bricks had a positive effect on SUNY Cortland Football. One was the support of the coaching staff. The first meeting of the offseason the head coach had a slide with literal bricks falling into place and building our culture. He echoed the same message that we were planning on preaching and set the table for the build. Next was the simplicity in how we represented the hard work. It's incredibly tough to see how each day can accumulate until the end. The visual of each week as

we built through the semester gave tangible evidence to each athlete. Lastly, the clear and frequent communication to the group about earning or not earning a brick each day kept them focused on the process of improving rather than the product. I truly believe that once an athlete embraces the grind of getting better, then they will start to realize their potential. Go forth and build your program, I feel incredibly lucky to have been a part of such an incredible journey, Legos, and all.

## Chapter 2:

### **Fostering Athlete Motivation and Building a Strong Weight Room Culture**

Madison Griess

As a strength & conditioning coach, my role extends far beyond simply improving athletic performance. Cultivating athlete motivation and establishing a robust weight room culture are two essential components of a championship program. In this reflective piece, I will delve into these foundational pillars and share insights from my experience with the Cal Lutheran Regals Soccer team, culminating in the 2023 DIII National Championship, the first in program history – a milestone achievement that showcased the power of motivation and strong team culture.

#### **Athlete Motivation**

*Cultivate Relationships:* Your athletes are more than just players; they are individuals with unique aspirations, challenges, and stories. Spend time getting to know them on a personal level. Show genuine interest in their lives beyond the field or the weight room. By building strong relationships based on trust and mutual respect, you create a supportive environment where athletes feel valued and understood. Being an alum of Cal Lutheran and the Regals Soccer program, I am fortunate to have the connections with this particular group come rather easily. I'm able to empathize with what they're feeling and use my experience to help guide them through their own journeys.

*Utilize Team Leaders:* Leadership is not confined to the coaching staff; it can also emerge from within the team. Identify and empower team leaders, such as upperclassmen and more experienced athletes, to take on leadership roles. These individuals can serve as mentors, role models, and accountability partners for their teammates. Encourage them to lead by example and uphold team standards both on and off the field. During our historic season, we had multiple fifth-year players and captains that I often looked towards to help motivate their teammates in ways that I couldn't. The relationships between these players and their trust in one another played a significant role in their success this year.

*Graduated Programming:* Every athlete's journey is unique, but they all start from the same foundation. We've implemented this by creating a graduated programming system that provides a structured pathway for athletes to progress and develop. Begin with basic programming that focuses on fundamental movements, technique, and building strength. As athletes demonstrate proficiency and commitment, gradually introduce more advanced exercises and training methods. This approach not only ensures proper progression but also instills a sense of achievement and motivation as athletes see tangible improvements in their performance.

*Set High Standards:* Excellence is not an accident; it is the result of high standards and relentless pursuit of improvement. Establish clear expectations and non-negotiables with the team each season regarding weight room conduct, attitude, work ethic, and communication. These

standards serve as the guiding principles that shape the team's culture and identity. Hold athletes accountable to these standards consistently, but also provide support and guidance to help them meet and exceed expectations. By setting the bar high, you challenge athletes to push beyond their comfort zones and strive for greatness. A concept that is often used in our program is "leaving the jersey in a better place". This means that everything we do in our time with the team has an impact on future generations and the legacy we leave behind. Through this, we're able to maintain these high standards with the purpose of always looking to improve.

***Build Trust:*** Trust is the foundation of any successful team. As a coach, it is essential to earn the trust and respect of your athletes. Demonstrate your commitment to their success by investing time and effort into their development. Be transparent and communicate openly with athletes about their goals, progress, and areas for improvement. Show empathy and understanding, especially during challenging times. By building trust, you create a cohesive and united team that is resilient in the face of adversity.

### **Weight Room Culture**

***Humility:*** Success is fleeting, but humility endures. Regardless of past achievements or accolades, approach each day with a hunger for improvement. Emphasize the importance of never becoming complacent or resting on past laurels. Encourage athletes to adopt a growth mindset, where they view challenges as opportunities for improvement and learning. By embracing humility, athletes remain grounded, hungry, and committed to continuous progress.

***Sacrifice:*** The journey to success often requires sacrifices along the way. Encourage athletes to prioritize the team's goals above their personal interests and ego. Remind them that success is a collective effort that requires selflessness, commitment, and sacrifice from every member of the team. Whether it's setting aside personal issues during training sessions or embracing a role that may not garner individual recognition, emphasize the importance of putting the team first. By fostering a culture of sacrifice, you create a cohesive and resilient team that is capable of overcoming any obstacle. Early mornings and grueling training sessions are just a few of the more unpleasant barriers that our athletes must face and overcome to find success. This program has instilled in their culture that, collectively, they must endure these challenges to be successful. These personal sacrifices of sleep, temporary discomfort, etc., are all small parts of their pursuit of greatness as a team.

***Work Ethic:*** Success is not determined by talent alone but by the relentless pursuit of excellence. Instill a culture of hard work, dedication, and perseverance in the weight room. Encourage athletes to push themselves beyond their limits and strive for excellence in every aspect of their training. Emphasize the importance of grit, consistency, and discipline. Whether it's pushing for that final rep or embracing the discomfort of a challenging training session, reinforce the value of a strong work ethic. By cultivating a culture of unwavering work ethic, you empower athletes to unlock their full potential and achieve greatness.

*Embrace Discomfort:* Growth occurs outside of one's comfort zone. Encourage athletes to embrace discomfort and adversity as opportunities for progress and development. Remind them that greatness lies on the other side of discomfort. Empower athletes to push beyond their perceived limits and embrace the challenges that come their way. Whether it's pushing through physical fatigue, mental barriers, or self-doubt, reinforce the importance of resilience. By getting comfortable with being uncomfortable, athletes develop the robustness and tenacity needed to succeed at the highest level.

In conclusion, fostering athlete motivation and building a strong weight room culture are integral to sustained success in this field. By employing these practices, you create an environment where athletes can thrive and achieve their full potential. As a coach, your leadership and guidance play a crucial role in shaping the culture and identity of the team. By instilling these principles and values, you lay the foundation for continued success on and off the field.

Our Regals embodied all these qualities this season, persevering through countless obstacles to eventually reach the ultimate goal. They had a record-breaking season, being the first unranked team to make it to the Final Four and the first to win the National Championship. They were also the first SCIAC (Southern California Intercollegiate Athletic Conference) team to win a National Championship in women's soccer. My experience with Regals Soccer exemplifies how these principles contribute to remarkable achievements and lasting success.

## **Chapter 3:**

### **A Championship Culture**

Michael Gragg

“A national championship has never been the goal of Harding Football, and it never will be. The goal of Harding Football is to have the very best culture anywhere in the country, and that, for us, is defined by honoring God. And what honors God is to love each other at a crazy high level.”  
- Harding University Head Football Coach Paul Simmons

Harding University is a private Christian University in Searcy, Arkansas with about 5,000 students and nearly 500 student athletes. The Harding Bisons Football team won the 2023 NCAA Division II National Championship after a historic 15-0 season.

Without Harding Football, I can honestly say I would not be the father, husband, or coach I am today. I have been the Head Strength and Conditioning Coach at Harding for a little over three years and was a member of the Football team from 2013 through 2017. I'd like to share a few things that make a difference about the Harding Bisons football team culture and highlight how I believe these qualities ultimately led to the result of our 2023 National Championship.

In 2012, I received an invitation to attend a prospect camp at Harding University, where I was first introduced to the team's culture and profound vision upheld by those who represented the black and gold. One moment that remains etched in my memory is the stirring recruiting pitch delivered by the now-retired Head Football Coach Ronnie Huckleba (Coach Huck). His words resonated deeply as he articulated what aspiring young men should seek in their college playing experience. Coach Huck assured the young men and families gathered that at Harding, the experience would be different. It wouldn't just be about winning, but about striving to become men who are dedicated to being good husbands and fathers, and men who Honor God in how they live and serve.

The passion and conviction with which Coach Huck spoke and the shared beliefs from his coaching staff sold me on being a Bison. Since the 2012 season, the Harding Football team has consistently achieved remarkable success, boasting an average of 10 wins per season, clinching three Conference Championships, and securing a National Championship.

#### **AVO**

“Amor Vincit Omnia” (AVO) is a team motto which is Latin for Love Conquers All. We believe the greatest motivator is love, not fear, not winning, and not hating to lose. When you really love somebody or something, it changes how you do things. Each year, Coach Simmons reminds the coaching staff exactly what his expectations are for how we will show love to players through on and off-the-field interactions. The spirit of AVO is seen in how coaches interact with players

daily. Players are often welcomed into coaches' homes for meals with their families. AVO is felt in the encouragement a player receives when he gets injured. AVO is how we support a teammate who loses a loved one or when someone in the community is in need and the team responds. We are imperfect, but Love Conquers All is a mantra that embodies who we aim to be at our best.

### **The Brotherhood**

If you walk into the Huckaba Fieldhouse, the indoor training facility that was fully funded by donations from former players and their families, you will immediately notice a massive banner that reads “The Brotherhood”.

Brotherhood is about service to those around you. Looking for opportunities to encourage, lift up, and help teammates. Ultimately, the Brotherhood is about building relationships that last a lifetime, not just a playing career. We build the Brotherhood in many ways. Each year during Fall camp the team takes a trip to the lake for cliff jumping, tubing, and sand volleyball. Likewise, every Spring after our last week of training, we will have a camping and float trip. These are just two examples of how we prioritize quality time away from the game that creates moments and memories to build the Brotherhood.

In the offseason, team leaders are selected to draft teams for the Bison Games—a weekly competition aimed at cultivating championship habits. It provides players with a chance to build connections with teammates they might not typically interact with, all while testing the leadership skills of our team captains as they guide their Bison Games squad toward victory each week. Players will compete in physical and mental challenges weekly while also being evaluated on their accountability and discipline. In order to succeed, team leaders must get the right players on the team, learn to empower teammates, hold them accountable when they fall short, and give praise when they succeed. Bison Games is often the highlight of many players' offseason and is invaluable in developing quality team leaders. As the saying goes “There are no bad teams, only bad leaders.”

For the Bisons, the Brotherhood is who we are. It's the mindset that no one player or coach is greater than the team. I'm reminded of the speech by Bo Schembechler in reference to Michigan Football “...the team... the team... the team.” When things don't go your way, when you don't feel like it, when you don't get the playing time you believe you should... one must remember that it's not about me, it's about the team.

### **Pursuing Excellence**

Winning is fun. Winning is paramount in college football. If you don't win, you might be hunting for a job. However, winning is an outcome. It is a result of many things going your way, but ultimately winning isn't something you can control. Therefore, aside from having the best culture in the country, a goal for Harding Football is to pursue excellence in all things. The pursuit of excellence, as opposed to winning, is a process-driven goal that allows us to earn small victories

in the pursuit of winning games. It gives team members the opportunity to take ownership of the things they can control to improve their circumstances.

Successfully pursuing excellence looks like having elite daily habits, consistency regardless of circumstances, intentionally developing relationships, and upholding the standards of the program. Having process-driven goals allows daily standards for performance and provides the ability to evaluate if the standard is being met or not. Examples of process-driven goals include sitting in the front row and being on time in class, having a snack and hydrating properly before and after practice, being prepared for position meetings, or fulfilling other expectations outlined by the coaching staff. By identifying process-driven goals, you give yourself the best chance to achieve the outcome-driven goals like earning good grades, crushing a practice/workout, or winning a championship.

During the season, the language each week is simple: How can we stack up as many small victories today, with the goal of giving ourselves the greatest chance of success on the field? Similarly, in the playoffs, when a loss means the season is over, the aim is “How can we gain an edge and find a way to spend one more week together practicing, training, and spending time together.”

Undoubtedly, our coaching staff prioritizes recruiting players who not only possess elite skills but also fit with our team culture. They are dedicated to developing these players to excel both on and off the field. When reflecting on Harding's sustained success, I often recall the All Blacks principle: "Better people make better All Blacks."

If you were to visit Harding, you would notice exceptional athletic facilities, top-tier academic programs, and a picturesque campus. However, what truly distinguishes Harding, and what I personally cherish most, is its players. It's undeniable – we have outstanding young men who continually uplift one another and inspire their coaches. When you have highly talented individuals in a brotherhood who love each other pursuing the best version of themselves in all their endeavors you give yourselves an excellent chance to win championships while also developing the qualities it takes to be an outstanding husband, father, and man of faith.

## Chapter 4:

### **Building a Winning Program: Pomona-Pitzer Cross Country**

Greg Hook

Talent wins, and culture sustains. One national championship is a challenging feat. Three national championships, under three different head coaches, is almost unheard of. It has been one of the greatest joys of my career to be on staff with Pomona-Pitzer men's cross country as they have built and continue to sustain this excellence.

The following sentiments capture my own learning and approach to teaching with this program.

1. *Research and understand the sport and program's history with athletic development and performance and program accordingly.*

Pomona-Pitzer men's cross country was a unique challenge. Prior to 2019, they had limited exposure to weightlifting, and I had limited knowledge of training distance runners. When I first began coaching, I used to think heavy weightlifting was for the sprinters, jumpers, and throwers and light dumbbell circuits were meant for the distance runners. I saw an overall lack of engagement by the distance athletes with the program and no tangible evidence to determine if what I was giving them was effective or a waste of time.

As I gained coaching experience, I began doing more research and taking coaching certification courses through the USTFCCCA. I realized that running fast is running fast no matter if it's 100 meters or 10,000 meters. I revamped my program and began making our "distance lifts" a more modified version of what I was giving the sprinters and jumpers on the team. In order to receive buy-in from the distance runners, I explained to them the concept of "speed reserve" and how the faster you are at a shorter distance, the more economical/efficient you can be at longer distances. In my opinion, one of the best ways that distance runners can improve is by focusing on their running economy through frequent exposure in the weight room. I realized by giving them the stimulus they were not experiencing on the track/trails, I was providing a more holistic program to enhance performance.

Our lifts followed a basic format of a loaded explosive exercise (hex bar jumps, DB step split jumps, etc.) paired with a plyometric movement. They would then move into a heavy bilateral movement (Hex Bar Deadlift, DB Goblet Squat, Safety Squat Bar Squat), paired with another plyometric or a vertical jump on our Plyomat. Their final superset was usually a compound upper body movement (Bench, Chin ups, Shoulder Press, etc.) paired with a single leg exercise (SL Squats off of a box, Skater squats, Lunges, etc.). I would sprinkle in core, mobility, and hamstring/calf work where I could to make it a well-rounded session. Athletes had to demonstrate movement mastery before advancing to heavier weights. Once I felt the athlete was

ready to push their max strength levels and the training/competition schedule allowed for it, we'd lift heavy.

2. *Maintain communication with the head coach, and regularly measure both sport and weight room performance. This helps with week-to-week programming, and it also helps build buy-in from your student-athletes. Remember that increasing their on-track, court, field, etc. performance is your ultimate goal.*

My biggest task with their in-season training was making sure the strength and conditioning program matched their running workout days. Cross country is a sport where the athletes must be at their fittest and fastest on race day or else they will not succeed. If I were to pile on heavy and taxing lifts on the days they were supposed to be resting/recovering, I would be setting them up for failure on race day. Before I wrote a single in-season lift for them, I sat down with their coach and mapped out their racing and training schedule. All three head coaches had slightly different training approaches, and it was important for me to adjust accordingly. We discussed what races would be important, which ones they would train through, and which meets were important season peaks. In addition to my role as the head athletic performance coach, I am also one of the sprints/hurdles/relay coaches on staff. Having a background in track and field helped throughout the periodization process because the distance coach and I spoke similar languages regarding training design.

The most important metric for their in-season training was our weekly vertical jumps. By having our cross country athletes “test” their verticals weekly, I was able to see how they were feeling on a given day. I usually set a threshold of 92.5% of their best jump to determine readiness to train. If they were consistently above that, usually they were ready for a big jump PR on a down week. If they were below that number consistently, I would chat with the athlete and their coach to see how training on the track has been going to determine whether they were still on the right training regimen. Moreover, weekly verticals created a healthy sense of competition between the athletes. In a sport that is so quantifiable, winning in a measurable metric was something all of the top runners wanted to do.

3. *Programming is most effective when the student-athletes push it forward, and fluid, real-time responses to their needs are essential. Educate yourself and build experience in ways that inspire buy-in and positivity in the weight room. Have a plan, and be willing to adjust in the face of challenges.*

Bridging the gap between the importance of the weight room to the cross country course can be tough. Lifting weights is not traditionally a staple in cross country programs especially at the high school level. Runners are becoming more aware of the value the weight room plays for endurance athletes, but there is still a hill to climb. I was able to enhance athlete motivation due to the following:

### **My role as a sprints coach**

Being a strength coach who is down at the track with our cross country athletes during spring track helped immensely create buy-in to the weights program. I am able to talk with them frequently and get to know them outside of the weight room. They see the investment I make with our track and field program and trust that I will do the same with our cross country programs in the fall.

### **Education**

With research continually published on the positive effects of strength training for endurance athletes, I make it a point of emphasis to educate our team on these findings. Pomona and Pitzer Colleges are high academic institutions and the student-athletes I coach are truly students first, athletes second. Most of them will become doctors or scientists once they hang up their track spikes and I have found by giving them science and data on the importance of a training methodology, there is an increased motivation they bring to those sessions. Also, by being around distance athletes/coaches, I know the difference between a progression long run workout, a threshold workout, a Vo2 max session, and everything in between. By explaining to them how recruiting more motor units will increase running economy which in turn will make their running workouts feel easier, they are more excited to go to the weight room rather than just seeing it as an extra training session.

### **Daily and Weekly Adjustments**

When I first began coaching sprinters, I had a big calendar mapping out the entire season and every session and I thought it was going to be a perfect training year. I found out quickly about the chaos that is a high academic Division 3 track and field season. While I still have a plan on how I want a season to progress, my day-to-day and week-to-week is much more fluid based on how the athlete is feeling. Sitting down and mapping out the season with the coach is step one, but she and I both know changes will be made in a given week. The athletes know if they need a down day or down week, they can ask for it. Usually, I have the data via jumps or their running workouts to show that in fact, more recovery will be the best method for them. This openness and transparency between myself and the team allows them to feel that the weight room is a value add to their overall training program and not a detractor.

4. *Allow space for both competition and joy in the weight room. It is easy and fun to develop talented, competitive student-athletes who love their sport. Less is often more in the weight room when student-athletes are like this. Encourage them to be themselves, give challenges, invite competition, and share joy and laughs when they come. Don't fix it if it is not broken.*

The way our men's cross country program interacts and utilizes the weight room is a similar approach to how they view their running workouts and all other aspects of their training. They are a group of men who will perform every single training session at a high level to be the best 8K runners possible and they are going to have a great time doing it. I was very fortunate to work with a junior and senior class who were absolute cross country/track and field junkies. They researched every training methodology, knew all of their best times for various distances (as well

as their competitors) and just generally kept a pulse on the running world. They are a group of men who simply love all things running. This fostered an environment where the goal was to push themselves and each other to improve in anything they could to decrease their 8K times every single day. They knew some of the best runners in the world lifted weights and they felt they were no exception. Every time they stepped into the weight room they knew the work that had to be put in order to be exceptional on the course.

While this commitment to a goal is something I see most of our teams on campus, what separated these men from other programs was how much they enjoyed the journey to get to that national championship goal. The team would find joy in any session they were doing, even the most brutal, high level cross country workouts. The weight room was no exception. There was constant playful banter on who could jump the highest, who would jump the lowest, and whose jumping form was the goofiest. When I began programming barbell bench press, they loved trying to rep out their final 95 lbs set as if it were the NFL combine. It was these seemingly small moments where I felt the team really bonded in a space that is traditionally affiliated with cross country. Eventually, they began asking if they could come into the weight room for another lift after their Saturday races. Especially in sports such as running, which are not typically looked upon as “fun,” the weight room is a great space to help facilitate joy. This was one tiny piece of the national championship puzzle, but an important one nonetheless.

While all of the things I have touched on above contributed to the Pomona-Pitzer Men’s Cross Country success over the past four seasons, the athletes themselves deserve all of the credit. While we as coaches help guide our student-athletes, it is them who are on the starting line putting themselves out there. It is them who are logging the miles and the weight room reps day after day after day. It is them who experience the highs of winning races and the lows of running poorly. In my years of coaching, I have never seen a group of men who quite simply just get what it takes to be a high level student athlete. I joke with my colleagues that working with this group is like driving a Ferrari. I am just glad this team trusted the coaching staff and myself with the keys.