

Combined Events Training for the High School Athlete

Eli Sunquist, Jacksonville Athletic Club

www.jaxtrack.com, @JAC_TrackField

The decathlon and heptathlon are events that are not for the weak of heart. They are events that take years to master, and are usually undertaken by the athletes who are the most dedicated. You cannot be great at the combined events if you don't have the hunger to be the best, or the time to dedicate to learning and working at all of the events. There is so much beauty in trying to become the best at multiple events and the best way to achieve those goals is to have a solid understand on HOW to train for the combined events. So I will start this off with encouragement (it can be done!) but also with a warning: if you aren't committed to putting in the work to becoming a great combined event athlete, put this down, walk away, and find something else to do.

If you look at all of the events in the heptathlon or decathlon, they are all speed / power events except for the last event (800m or 1500m). So your training for the combined events must reflect the demands of the event as a whole. The majority of your training should be geared for speed and power gains. The faster you become, and more powerful you are, the better you will be across the board. A faster athlete will be able to sprint faster, hurdle faster, jump higher (and farther) and have more speed in the throws, which *should* lead to farther throws.

The neat thing about it is the more you train for acceleration, speed, power, strength, etc, your endurance qualities will also improve. The training for all of the events (properly) help out in the long run, *for* the long run. I have found that with good tempo run training, as well as proper placement of "pacing runs" for the final event help tremendously in both decreased time, as well as confidence heading into the last event. I always want my athletes to look forward to that last event. It becomes yet another opportunity to PR and score more points.

When we train our combined event athletes (even during the high school season), we try to hit each event (or commonalities of those events) twice a week. This can be done in a 2 hour practice, as long as it is planned out. "Go hurdle today" or "just go with the jumpers" will not suffice, as it will have the athlete most likely spend too much time on one event, and not come close to balance of training that a combined event athlete needs.

The main thing to understand is that training for the combined events should be a process that is planned out, and not something that is just guessed upon. That is a true recipe for disaster. With proper planning and organization, the high school combined event athlete will be light-years ahead of his or her competition.

Notes:

In terms of "strengths and weaknesses" I try to work hard at the athletes strengths, and even harder at their weaknesses! It may sound cliché, but there should not be any event that gets a pass because the athlete is already proficient in that event. You should always be striving to improve! As a high school athlete this should be no problem at all.

For the very beginning decathlete, we put a priority on the learning and development in the hurdles, pole vault, and javelin.

For the very beginning heptathlete, we put a priority on the learning and development in the hurdles, javelin, and high jump.

Training Philosophy

Cliff Rovelto, extremely successful combined events coach at Kansas State, talks about the “3 C’s” in combined event training (commonality, complementary, and compatible). When you train for the combined events, your training needs to look at **common** parts across the events (ex. takeoff drills that work across events, or acceleration drills, or MB throwing drills, etc) the training on one day needs to **compliment** that of the next, and the types of modalities that you use in one training session need to be **compatible** to each other. The best way that I have found to do this is through the “high / low” type of training. This method has been used by many successful sprint and hurdle programs, most notably that of the late Canadian sprint coach, Charlie Francis. We do something of very high neural demand one day (speed / power), and then very low / general the next. The two extremes provide clear signals to the brain as to what we are trying to accomplish each day, and this type of training allows the body to supercompensate after a workout, not just reach homeostasis (stability / normal resting point). We always take a day off each week (Sunday)

Skeleton Format:

I keep this format the same throughout the training year, from September to August

Monday- Acceleration Development (from stand, blocks, crouch, etc), Jumps (bounds, or technical work), Throws (Medicine ball or shot put)

Tuesday- Throw or Vault Technique (JT for heps, PV for decs), Tempo runs (runs of lower intensities, with shorter rests), general strength circuits

Wednesday- Hurdles, LJ approaches, LJ work, Speed Endurance

Thursday- As Tuesday

Friday- Acceleration Development / Speed Development, Jumps, Throws (Medicine ball or shot put)

Saturday- Throw Technique (DT and JT), tempo running

Notes:

As you can see in each week we try to cover each event twice, and if each session/grouping is kept at about 30min-45min, you can do a whole training session in around 2 hours each day (maybe a tad longer on some high neuro days.)

When the training year starts, we immediately do acceleration development and jump / throw work, however the speed endurance work (on Wednesdays) does not start up till later on, once we have spent some quality time on acceleration and speed development.

Always remember the emphasis needs to be on speed and power development! Fast, explosive, high speed movements with high power outputs, coupled with quality rest.

Have “plan b” workouts prepared, in case of weather, injury, facility issues, etc.

Always look at what you did the day before, and what you will be doing next. There must be a balance.

I always advocate for one coach to put together the training for the combined event athlete. Different coaches can help the athletes out in different events, but there needs to be one coach or “director” who organizes the training. This ensures clear communication and expectations.

Sample Microcycles

Sample Week in General Prep

Mon- Acceleration Development- 4x20m, 3 x 30m, 2 x 20m (2'-3'btw runs, 4' btwn sets). Bounds- (SLJ, STJ, RR-LL, standing 5 bounds) x 4, Throws- Power MB throws- 4 exercises x 5

Tues- Low Intensity Technique Drills- Jav work w/ MB and PV walking drills, as well as jump fundamental drills (skips, posture work, etc) Tempo runs to follow- 8 x 200m w/ 2' rest @ 70%

Wed-Hurdle drills, then 10 x 10 hurdles, low and close w/ 3 steps between. Bleacher bounds to follow

Thurs- Drills as Tuesday. Then general strength circuits x 3 (30" on, 20" off). Extended cool down to follow

Fri- Sled Pulls over 30m-40m or hill sprints of 40m-50m. Bounds and throws as Monday.

Sat- Easy throws technical day, 10 x 100m tempo runs w/ 2' rest @ 70%

Sample Week in Pre-Competition

Mon-4 x 20m, 4 x 30m, 2 x 40m. HJ technical work, SP to follow

Tues- Heps- JT, Decs- PV. Tempo to follow (8 x 200m w/ 2' rest). Cool down w/ circuits

Wed- Hurdle work (fast!) then LJ approaches on track x 6, 3 x 120m to follow w/ long rest btwn

Thurs- As Tuesday

Fri- Similar to Monday, w/ sprints, HJ, and SP

Sat- Throw (JT and DT) 1500m / 800m pacing runs

Sample Week in Competition

Mon-4 x 20m, 3 x 30m, 2 x 40m from blocks. HJ technical work, SP to follow

Tues- Heps- JT, Decs- PV. Tempo to follow (8 x 200m w/ 2' rest)

Wed- Hurdle work (fast!) then LJ approaches on track x 6, 3 x 120m to follow

Thurs- As Tuesday, some DT before tempo runs

Fri- Block starts over 3H, hurdle hops 4 x 4, OHB x 4

Sat- Competition- 110mH, PV, SP, 4 x 400m relay

Specific Ideas for Meets During the High School Season

It is quite difficult for a good decathlete or heptathlete to make everyone happy during the high school season. Your typical combined event athlete will be good at multiple events, and a lot of times the high school coach will only want the kids to compete in their best events. In my opinion, if you have a kid who really wants to be a combined event athlete, you need to let them compete in all of their events (save the javelin or 800m/1500m) at some point during the high school season. They should most definitely do their strong events to help out the team at the big invitational / district meets, however they should be able to use the smaller meets / dual meets to compete in some of their weaker events. The competitive experience is very beneficial for them. Promising combined event athletes should not do the same 4 events every single meet of the season.

I have always found it beneficial to have them do a sprint, a jump, a relay, and a throw every few meets. Sometimes this isn't possible due to the meet schedule (or location of throws area in relation to rest of track) but it's a good guide. For instance, if you have a heptathlete competing in a lower key meet, it would be a good idea for her to do the 100mH, LJ, SP and run on the 4x4. For a decathlete who is a very good vaulter, it would be a good idea for him to do the 110mH, HJ or LJ, DT, and 4x4. He can save his PV for the upcoming invitational. I like having my combined event athletes run on the 4x4, as it is a great "gut check" race, as well as a great training session hidden in competition. Finally, it is at the end of the meet!

The main thing to stress when it comes to planning for meets / season management is that the big picture must be kept in mind. If you understand that the little meets aren't that important, and that some meets should be used as nothing more than glorified practice sessions, then you can go into the meets looking to always improve on the weaker events, and allow them to gain that valuable competitive experience in those events.

I have provided an example of what could be done with a decathlete, whose stronger events are the hurdles, PV, and LJ. He has a small dual meet on Wednesday, and a very important invitational on Saturday

Sample Week in Competition Season, 1 low key meet, 1 invitational

Mon- Block starts- 4 x 20m, 4 x 30m (some over hurdles). LJ technique, MB throws

Tues- PV, 6 x 200m tempo runs

Wed- Dual Meet-100m, HJ, DT, 4 x 400m relay

Thurs- PV drills, JT drills, 6 x 200m or general strength circuits, or strides in grass (depends on how he feels after meet) i.e. easier recovery day

Fri- block starts over hurdles, shot put power throws (brief quality session)

Sat- Invitational- 110mH, PV, 4 x 400m relay

Conclusion: A few years ago one of my decathletes improved over 1000 points in one year. How did he do it? I have an idea..... On his second day of practice with me (Tuesday) he showed up 5 minutes late. We had 8x200m on the sheet, and I made him run two extra, as I explained to him that showing up late was not acceptable. The following Tuesday he showed up late again. On purpose. He wanted to do two more, as he wanted to be the best. The rest of the month he showed up late on those days, just to do more work. It was no secret to me that he was going to be a special decathlete. He wanted to work hard, and he wanted to be the best. Remember that accomplishing great things take great sacrifices and hard work!