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Using the Web to Enhance a High School Cross Country Program:
A Case Study of PalatineCC.net
http://www.palatinecc.net

I first designed a web site for my dad when I coached with him at Moline for a year. It was rudimentary but allowed me to learn about programming and posting web pages. I then created PalatineCC.net in the spring of 2002 with the sole purpose of making a shrine to my athletes. Our sport is largely ignored by the press, and only a few select athletes will ever be covered anyway. I wanted to cover all of my kids while also teaching them about the history and tradition of cross country and track and field at Palatine.

I was lucky enough to get in on a great trend – the transition from old media news to new media news. The Internet is democratic that way. I knew I could create content about our sport (and my team specifically) better than the newspaper beat reporters so I fulfilled a market need. Check out these stats for the last year (reporting on a 50-60 guy team):

1,738,725 hits in the last year
113,881 visits (defined as a user accessing more than one page or staying 10+ minutes)

March 2008 – 14,572 visits
April 2008 – 14,934 visits
May 2008 – 11,094 visits
September 2008 – 9,782 visits
October 2008 – 9,385 visits

My site has grown each year, and alumni who were used to using it in high school now follow our team year round. Long lost alums find us on the web and regain contact, parents have many questions easily answered, and our kids get to read about the team and see pictures, results, mileage, and other information. Also, the site serves as a great marketing tool for incoming freshman, enabling them to learn about our team, its traditions, and its successes.

In the end PalatineCC.net has become a labor of love. It took a lot of time to establish the site, but it has become an easy to update, invaluable resource for my team. If one goal is to establish a community of athletes, then a web site strengthens that community. It cannot replace actual contact between coach and athlete, but kids these days find much more of their community through an online, virtual world than most of us did. The web is the primary way that they communicate with each other, and my site certainly opens up many channels of communication.

Among parents and kids, on-demand web information is an expectation <u>not</u> a luxury.

Technical Issues in Creating a Site

There are three ways you would probably go about creating a site. Each has its pros and cons.

Method	Pros	Cons
Publish on a school site	• Free hosting • Free domain name • Connected directly to school's athletics page	• Limited to style and theme of school site • Potential access issues – cannot FTP files from home due to firewall
Publish on your own domain and in your own space	• Full creative control • Can be updated with an FTP client from any computer • Branded domain name	• Costs money for hosting and domain registration • Not affiliated directly with school's athletics page
Publish through a template site	• No programming expertise necessary • Easy to update • Easy style formatting	• Limited to style and theme of the templates • Stability of hosting site – many businesses cease to exist at certain points

If you decide to purchase your own domain and space, you will need the following:

- A web address (register a domain)
- A hosting spot (pay for a certain amount of space)
- A web editor (Front Page, Dreamweaver),
- An FTP client (SmartFTP, CuteFTp, GoFTP)
- A directory structure to organize all of the site's files (on your computer's hard drive)

Costs
- $20 per month for hosting (big site now, using 1.2 Gigabytes of space)
- $150 for a 10 year buy of the domain name palatinecc.net
- $75-100 for a web editor
- Free for the FTP client

Technical Considerations:
- Sections of the site – Decide on a main menu of site areas. My areas include Archive, Coaches, Links, Workouts, Results, Pictures, History, Links, Message board, Mileage
- File naming conventions – Create and maintain a strict process for file naming. One example could be: miles_2008-1001-1007. I always begin a file name with the area of the site to which it belongs followed by an underscore and additional information. Alphabetized files with underscores are easy to organize.
- Version control – Maintain only one version of the site
- Organized folder structure – Give each site section its own folder, plan for scalability
- Site theme – Set up a constant menu, look, and feel for each page

Web Site Values and Difficulties

The Value

- Provides fresh news and information to parents, alums, and athletes
- Eliminates needs for meet sheets, driving directions, and practice schedules
- Markets the program to prospective athletes
- Collects the history of the program
- Collects performance history of the team – kids love lists!
- Allows the compilation of pertinent info for the team – mileage, workouts, splits, results
- Glorifies the achievements of the athletes on your team – all athletes can be covered!
- Attaches a sense of caring and importance to your enterprise
- Enables positive affirmations to be seen by all – motivates kids through positive notoriety
- Provides a message board for intra-team networking
- Allows easy publication of pictures
- Enables fairly easy publication of audio and video content

The Difficulties

- Content generation takes time
- Web sites without fresh content quickly lose visitors
- Graphic design is difficult
- Site design and features are limited by a lack of programming knowledge
- Advanced web features are not included in web editors
- Interactive activities (message boards, wikis) must be moderated
- Potential for inflammatory content
- Transparency to other programs
- Student image issues

The Future

- Video
- Wiki – user-generated content
- Audio podcasts
- Online store – gear sales, fundraising
- Revamped graphic design