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Will Puberty Slow my Daughter Down?

Adding slow, easy mileage can keep girls fit and strong.
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Question: My ten-year-old daughter's school holds a timed mile twice a year. She has improved by 15-30 seconds each time she runs it, her most recent finish was 6 minutes and 47 seconds. She does not train but is active in soccer, gymnastics, etc. **Can she expect to get faster each year into high school or does puberty slow a girl down?**

- Kelly, NC

Kelly,

Your daughter fits into a category of what I admiringly call "pre-pubescent flyers." Girls her age, who are in shape from whatever athletic activity they enjoy, can often do what your daughter has done. They run fast because they are all elbows, knees and lungs. For some reason, they also tend to have very good natural running form.

However, there are two parts to the answer for your question.

1. Yes, she will definitely slow down when she develops. The added weight will do that naturally.
2. She will also stop improving or maybe even slow down as she reaches the limits of what the other sports can do for her fitness as a runner. In short, she is getting better because of her natural talent for running and being at a somewhat less than ideal level of shape.

If she decides to focus on running and participate in cross country or track in high school she will have to adopt specific training routines for a runner that will fully develop the required conditioning.

Furthermore, once she is fully developed, she will need to add several more miles per week of slow, easy running to her regular total. This will limit the amount of fat she will add to her weight as needed to support her period. The extra mileage will also make her stronger and help her continue to improve.

Unfortunately, few coaches and athletes realize that the added mileage is the solution. They typically try to respond to the slowing performances by running harder workouts on both their easy, recovery days and their hill or speed work days. That does not help burn up extra fat calories and worse, just leads to overtraining. The eventual frustration will cause her to drop the sport or just resign herself to being slower.

Each year that a runner ages, she gets stronger. That allows an increase of typically 10-15 more miles per week of distance run. This also makes the runner stronger and therefore faster. So, it comes down to getting older and running more miles each year. This is why a 7th or 8th grader starts out with 10-15 miles per week and by the time she is a fully mature marathoner at age 30 can run the required 120-130 mile per week needed in order to set personal career best times.

Hope this puts the future into perspective for your daughter.

Miles of smiles,
Coach Benson

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