

Training in the Hallways: Bad Weather Options for the Track & Field Coach

Boo Schexnayder



Introduction

One of the greatest dilemmas facing any track and field coach is what to do when the weather is bad and you have no legitimate indoor track facility in which to train. I get asked the question all the time, and often it seems I am expected to offer a perfect solution. The fact of the matter is that this is a compromised situation, and you can't operate at top efficiency when forced to use gyms and hallways. Yet, there are ways to improvise and make significant progress.

The Musts

When facing a bad weather/limited facility situation, you can be successful...in fact, you can be very successful. But there are two absolute musts.

1. **Clearly View Your Goals.** It is critical that you have a very well organized list of athletic abilities and qualities that you want to train, and that you have a firm understanding of what each entails. This knowledge is prerequisite to creativity. Far too many indoor workouts become busy work, as opposed to purposeful training, because the coach's goals for the session are not well defined. Go into each session with a purpose, the same purpose you would have if it were 80 degrees and sunny outside. Only the activities of the session differ, not the session's purpose.
2. **Have A Can-Do Attitude.** It's easy to punt on first down when you see piles of snow outside that won't be gone until April. Great coaches are grinders. Use creativity to find ways to do things, rather than finding excuses not to.

Problem Areas

Usually it's not too difficult to find places to do warmup activities, plyometrics, or strength training. However, run training and technical training require space, and are the most difficult forms of training to accomplish when weather is poor. We will center most of our discussion on these.

Safety

Cramped quarters increase the risk of collision and injury. When designing indoor, modified workouts, consider not only where athletes will run and train, but also the return path after the exercise's completion. Schools with square or rectangular hallway patterns are convenient for this reason, athletes can continue around the hallway's perimeter to get back in line for the next repetition. Always think in terms of a loop. When running indoors, make sure to leave room for deceleration. Most shin splints result not from the harder surfaces, but from the more abrupt stopping. Also, arm and hand injuries are likely if athletes must place their hands on the walls to help themselves to stop. It's better to run a meter or two less, leaving a few more room for deceleration, to keep things safe.

Flexible Microcycles

If the possibility exists that weather might be mild enough to get outside, observe some flexibility when planning your weekly training. Design them with an eye on the weather forecast, ready to jump outside when the opportunity presents itself. Keep in mind that even then, colder weather results in hardened track surfaces and caution must still be taken.

Warming Up

Seldom should the warmup be a problem in these situations. A warmup jog need not be a warmup jog. In fact, combinations of forward running, backward running, and side shuffling are more productive and can be adapted to any venue. Typically a place can be found to stretch and do dynamic flexibility work. Sprint drills can be done in halls or gyms. I know many coaches who keep 6-8 hurdles in their classrooms, so that they can easily be brought into the hallways after class hours to do hurdle mobility and hurdle drills.

Acceleration Development

Training acceleration can be a challenge in modified indoor situations. Ideally, acceleration work takes the form of sprint or resisted efforts of 10-30 meters. While 30 meter sprints are tough in most hallway situations, the shorter stuff can be done in hallways or gyms. Then, supplement this with other related activities to enhance the training effect. Stair running is technically very similar to resisted accelerations. Skip every other step to produce a slight forward lean and a more forceful, extended pushoff. Lunge jumps activate practically the same muscle fibers and employ the same firing patterns as accelerations, and are another good supplementary tool. Stepup jumps are great as well. If you are in a gym, you can train a bunch of athletes at once on the first step of the gym bleachers. Indoor blocks are also available for technical rehearsal of the block start.

For example, once I set up an acceleration circuit where athletes sprinted up a staircase to the second floor, then sprinted down the hall (about 15m with 5 meters to decelerate), went down a different staircase, then sprinted back across to the original staircase. Everybody finished with a few sets of lunge jumps.

Speed Development

True speed development requires space... athletes must be brought to top velocity for a second or two, so normally 50-60 meters are needed, along with place to decelerate. This is seldom available in these compromised situations. However, dissecting speed performance can enable the coach to train many of the elements of speed, making considerable progress so that improvements occur much more quickly when you are finally able to get outside.

First of all, the positions of maximal velocity sprinting must be taught. These can be done using sprint drills or shorter technical runs. One of my favorite ways to teach these positions and postures is using stair running. Since maximal velocity sprinting involves vertical postures and pushing, have the athletes hit every step (as opposed to every other step when training acceleration). Quick, vertical force application is the hallmark of maximal velocity sprinting. For this reason, vertical jumps with short contact times such as pogo jumps, vertical bounds, or hurdle hops should be part of a speed development unit.

When speed development work is done outside in a traditional manner, the recoveries are fairly long (3-5 minutes). These long recoveries can work in your favor. I have often had athletes warm up inside, bundle up, then go outside to do a 60 or a 90 meter sprint-float-sprint effort. After the run, they immediately return inside and resume light warmup exercises, before exiting again for the next effort.

Speed Endurance. True speed endurance work requires space... athletes must be brought to top velocity for several seconds, so normally 80-100 meters are needed, along with place to decelerate. While certain components of speed endurance cannot be adequately addressed in tight spaces, many can.

The best way to approach speed endurance work in compromised settings is to use broken runs. For example, if the ideal outdoor workout would be 120's with 6-8 minutes of rest, indoors you can have the athlete run four 30's with practically no rest in between. Then allow the 6-8 minutes of rest, before resuming the next broken-up 120. This can be done in a down-and-back format, or around the perimeter of a rectangular hallway. Speed endurance sessions can be enhanced using the same vertical jumping exercises as used in speed development. Also, indoor warmups can be mixed with outdoor runs as previously mentioned.

Endurance Development

The hard surfaces and pounding typically associated with improvised indoor training mean that it will be very difficult to achieve high volumes of run or jump training. For this reason, the run and jump training you do must be of high value. It's a waste to do tons of longer running for endurance purposes, nor is it wise to do extended hops and bounds in such tough training conditions. Save as much of your weekly running and jumping volumes for speed and high quality work, keeping your run and jump training short and sweet. Accomplish your endurance goals using circuit training.

To do this, combine general strength (bodyweight) exercises into circuits with are tough enough to challenge the athlete's fitness levels. By carefully selecting the work and rest time increments, you can create a situation that is very challenging. Very short sprints can be mixed into enhance the fitness effect.

One of my favorite such circuits is a scramble circuit. I'll line up the athletes on the baseline of a basketball court. I'll have them do some general strength exercise. Then, after 20 seconds or so, I'll shout out "sprint!" and they immediately and quickly scramble to their feet and sprint to the opposite baseline, then reset for the next (different) exercise. I allow 40 seconds from the sprint command, to the start of the next exercise, and a circuit consists of 12 exercise-sprint combinations. You can use the same premise with simple jump exercises.

This circuit typically has them begging for running workouts... the moral is that a creative coach can develop fitness using circuits, thus reducing the run and jump related pounding on the body and limiting chances of injury.

Preventing Lower Leg Syndromes

The key to surviving hallway run training is keeping the work intense but of low volumes, and maintaining flexibility and mobility in the feet. The feet act as the body's shock absorbers, and repeated pounding on hard surfaces reduces their pliability and shock absorbing ability.

Finish each session with barefoot exercises like heel walks, toe walks, and walks on the sides of the feet. I like to use several foot mobility exercises that I stole from ballet and dance teachers. Self-massage can also be used at the completion of the session to maintain softness and pliability in the feet.

Technical Training – Hurdles

There are a myriad of hurdle drills that can be adapted to modified indoor training to assist athletes in developing familiarity with the movements of hurdling. Our tougher challenge comes from the necessity to train hurdles in a competition specific way. When using hallways and gyms, the challenge is more often scheduling and safety than accomplishing the hurdling itself.

I have often accomplished sprint hurdle workouts over one and two hurdles in these situations, but traffic control around the venue is a must. Scissor style hurdles are a must as well, since they fall apart upon impact and are much less likely to produce a fall.

Technical Training – Jumps

There are many exercises and drills that jumpers can use in limited spaces to address the fundamentals of preparation, takeoff, and even flight. While actual event specific practice might be impossible to accomplish, typically these exercise are actually more appropriate to early season training anyway, and frankly are underused in many jumps training programs.

Power skipping, gallops over very low hurdles, and repetitive takeoffs present the chance to train nearly all aspects of horizontal jump technique. These, combined with curve running, form a very adequate high jump preparation program.

The same exercises done with a medicine ball held overhead become pole vault specific. Combining these with jogging plants (pole top sliding on the floor) and spotted takeoffs against a gym wall form a nice preparation program what lessens the time needed to get the athletes vault-ready.

Technical Training – Throws

Modified Implements are the answer when considering adapting throw-specific training to such circumstances. None of the following would cause damage or danger if thrown against a gym wall. Medicine balls are excellent to train the shot put, and can even be placed inside a towel to train hammer, weight, or even discus movements. Cones are great way to train the discus and javelin. The no-bounce version of lacrosse balls can be used for javelin training as well. There are a number of specific commercial implements available as well for each throwing event.