



UNITED STATES ACADEMIC DECATHLON®

BUILDING A TEAM

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COACHING ACADEMIC DECATHLON®

Coaching Academic Decathlon is a richly rewarding and challenging endeavor. Participation in USAD provides a plethora of experiences for both academic and personal enrichment for students and coaches alike. USAD is a perfect forum for pursuing academic excellence, building team interaction, developing cooperative interpersonal relationships, and realizing personal potential.

The coach is an integral component in the USAD program. Coaches organize teams, nurture academic skills, provide opportunities for research and study, and foster individual writing, speaking, and listening skills. In sponsoring a high school Decathlon team, coaches have an unparalleled opportunity to study and integrate academic disciplines and to inspire bright young students to excel in a variety of academic challenges.

ABOUT USAD

In 1968 Dr. Robert Peterson, former Superintendent of Schools in Orange County, California, created the Academic Decathlon®. He believed that everyone's learning potential could be maximized through competitive challenge, and the success of the Academic Decathlon® has proven him correct. Today the Academic Decathlon® is considered the premier high school team academic competition in the United States, and it allows outstanding student achievement to be showcased nationwide.

The United States Academic Decathlon®, a nonprofit association with a corporate Board of Directors, was founded in 1981 in Orange County, California. Following is the mission statement of USAD:

The purpose of the United States Academic Decathlon® is to develop and provide academic competitions, curriculum, and assessment to promote learning and academic excellence through teamwork among students of all achievement levels.

The Academic Decathlon® is unique among academic competitions because it involves students at the "A," "B," and "C" academic levels working together as a team to achieve a specific goal. The impact of Decathlon participation on the "C" students is particularly significant, and many "C" students have improved their personal academic achievement after participating in the Decathlon. In addition, the Decathlon includes students from grades nine through twelve, giving the younger students a chance to become involved in an academic competition early in their high school careers.

The purposes of the Academic Decathlon are to

- develop a greater respect for knowledge
- promote wholesome competition in academic areas of study and interest
- stimulate intellectual growth and achievement
- encourage public interest in and awareness of academic excellence in American schools

Currently, there are Academic Decathlon programs in 38 states. USAD would like to see the program expanded to all fifty states, Washington, D.C., and Puerto Rico, and efforts are being directed toward this goal.

USAD VISION STATEMENT

USAD provides students of all learning levels the opportunity to excel academically through team competition.

UNITED STATES ACADEMIC DECATHLON® MISSION STATEMENT

The purpose of the United States Academic Decathlon is to develop and provide academic competitions, curriculum, and assessment to promote learning and academic excellence through teamwork among students of all achievement levels.

UNITED STATES ACADEMIC DECATHLON CORE VALUES

As a premier national scholastic competition for high school students, United States Academic Decathlon believes in:

- The academic growth of students; Challenging multidisciplinary learning;
- Teamwork as a means to achieve self-knowledge and life-skills development;
- Providing equal opportunities for students of varying achievement levels;
- The inclusion and diversity of students that enrich learning and the human experience;
- High standards of honesty and integrity;
- Transparency in our relations and interactions with all of our stakeholders;
- Excellence in our programs, services and activities; and,
- Respect for diverse points of view.

USAD STAFF

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THE ACADEMIC DECATHLON® TEAM

Honor Division: 3.750 – 4.00 GPA

Scholastic Division: 3.000 – 3.749 GPA

Varsity Division: 0.00 – 2.999 GPA

A team consists of nine full-time students from the ninth through twelfth grades of the same high school. Each team is made up of three Honor students, three Scholastic students, and three Varsity students in accordance with the above grade point average definitions. Contestants may compete in a higher division than their own grade point average category but not in a lower division.

Each team member competes in all ten events of the Decathlon and is eligible for individual medals in all ten events. Only six scores count for the final team standing in the competition—the top two Honor scores, the top two Scholastic scores, and the top two Varsity scores. A school may therefore enter with fewer than nine members and still be eligible for team awards as long as there are at least two Honor, two Scholastic, and two Varsity members.

The specific guidelines for calculating GPA to place students in one of the three divisions are discussed later in this manual.

Building a Team

Team Dynamics

One of the most important components of success in Academic Decathlon is having clear-cut goals. These goals must be set not only by the coach, but also by team members. Team members must feel that they are a part of the process—planning, researching, peer-teaching, or motivating. The more involved students become in the process, the more excited they become about the products they produce and the scores they ultimately earn.

Team Philosophy

Building a successful team is a collaborative effort. Coaches and team members work best together when everyone understands the team goals and feels a part of the decision-making process. Developing a team philosophy at the beginning of the competition season is a great way to develop an effective environment.

Both coaches and students must collaborate in the development of a team philosophy. It is imperative that the students feel that they are involved in goal setting and team planning. Each team member must have both personal goals and team goals.

One way to begin an Academic Decathlon season is by deciding what the coach and the team want from the Decathlon experience and how these goals can best be met. Sometimes it helps to look at last year's team and the performance of team members. Returning members may want to establish both individual and team goals based on previous competition seasons. Team members should think about all ten events and, based on a realistic analysis of the present level of mastery of each event, set goals for upcoming competitions. Setting goals for practice competitions, mock competitions, and scrimmages with other schools will help individual members reach their potential.

About a month before the first official meet, it is a good idea to revisit the individual goals and establish revised objectives for overall team performance. Having a plan for success is a great way to focus students and coaches on the task ahead. Success may be winning a competition, qualifying for the next meet, or just raising individual or team scores in one or more events.

Recruiting Academic Decathletes

One of the most important jobs of a coach is team recruiting. Ultimately, nothing will matter as much as the students who participate in the program. Finding students who enjoy Decathlon and become involved and committed is well worth the time and energy a coach will spend on recruiting. As coaches search for potential Decathletes, remember that this program is developing life-long learners and that coaches have the potential to change lives.

Here are just a few recruiting strategies that might work for your team:

1. Advertise in the school paper and in course selection packets handed out to students in the spring when they are making selections for the next school year. Use this time to introduce the Academic Decathlon® Program to students during class assemblies and homerooms, or advisory periods.
2. Contact teachers of honors and gifted and talented students and ask them to tell their students about the program. They can advertise a preliminary meeting for those who express interest—and they can keep a special eye out for varsity candidates, who tend to be hard to recruit.
3. Use the Decathletes who are already committed to the Academic Decathlon® program to help find other students (friends, siblings, neighbors) who are potential recruits. The best people to locate Decathletes are almost always other Decathletes.
4. Review students' academic records, especially SAT, ACT, PSAT/NMSQT score reports.
5. Announce meetings on the school marquee; over the school's public address system; in posters, banners, and signs; at parent and community meetings (PTSA, Boosters' Club, etc.); in special school bulletins; in the school newspaper; and in newsletters to parents.
6. Have after-school meetings to introduce the program. Plan these meetings and always include food with instruction or information. Don't forget to have fun.
7. Send Decathletes to homerooms or advisory periods to tell students about the program. Invite them to attend scheduled meetings.
8. Conduct special recruitment meetings for students and for parents.
9. Conduct special activities to showcase the Academic Decathlon® such as Mock Super Quiz (Decathletes versus faculty; former Decathletes versus current Decathletes).
10. Display awards (especially newspaper Articles and pictures) won in previous Decathlon competitions.

The Profile of a Decathlete

All good Decathletes love learning—both the learning process and knowledge itself. Those who love learning for the sake of learning will be intrigued with studying new and diverse subjects in Decathlon. Remember that each student in each category must compete in all ten events and that their scores for all subjects count. Specialization is not an option.

General Category Profiles

- **Honor Students** should be disciplined, focused on team goals, and committed to working with varsity students. Because these students are generally quite ambitious, they may be involved in a variety of activities. They are usually well-organized and able to cope well with busy schedules. An eclectic honor student with diversified skills often serves as a great resource for the team.
- **Scholastic Students** are often the brightest students on the team, but they may also be a bit unmotivated (perhaps not to the same extent as varsity students). They are usually as capable as honor students, but less interested in grades. In order to attain their highest potential, they should be “pitted” against honor students in practice events and encouraged to elevate their performance to that level.
- **Varsity Students** are an eclectic group. Many are simply underachievers who, for one reason or another, are not motivated to make higher grades in the traditional classroom. Others simply struggle in one subject that brings down their GPA. Some of the best varsities, however, may have had little success academically. Many do not really feel the need for affirmation (they never have had it) and tend not to be “teacher pleasers.” Their grades simply do not reflect their innate abilities. These students, although posing special challenges for coaches, are often times the key to team success. Once these students begin to buy into the concept of working and being rewarded, they can become the most motivated team members. They also add variety and much needed humor to study sessions.

Advanced Placement, Gifted and Talented, and International Baccalaureate programs are always good places to look for Decathletes. It is important, however, also to consider students who, for one reason or another, are not involved in advanced academic classes. Be creative in your search for Decathletes; limiting team membership to specialized or advanced classes sometimes overlooks students with superb potential. Because USAD tests a variety of skill sets, it may be that the perfect team member is just “flying under the radar” in his or her scholastic career and is waiting for a challenge to present itself.

During the recruitment process, coaches must constantly be mindful of the categories in which students will compete. Some coaches conduct an informal assessment by asking students to complete a grade calculation sheet. This early assessment allows coaches to maintain a balance of Honor, Scholastic, and Varsity students.

Recruiting Varsity Students

Because of the nature of these students, Varsity students generally do not just walk up to the Academic Decathlon® Coach and say “Hi, I am interested in your program, and by the way, I’m a Varsity student.” Coaches will probably spend as much time, or more, recruiting one or two good Varsity students as they spend finding twenty other Scholastic and Honor students.

Locating potential Varsity students can be expedited by soliciting advice from teachers who have the training to recognize these students and see their potential despite the lack of academic success they may have in the classroom. Teachers of gifted and talented or challenge programs, enrichment, college preparatory and International Baccalaureate are generally trained to identify these students. Coaches should ask these teachers to help encourage these students to participate. Coaches may also want to prepare a checklist that can be used to identify and access these students.

Characteristics of Successful Decathletes

Decathletes, merely by their participation in the USAD program, sometimes demonstrate a profile that makes them unique in the school community. Although individuals vary, successful Decathletes generally demonstrate some of the following general characteristics:

- They enjoy learning—and being able to shape their own learning.
- They are often intrigued by new innovations, electronics, and games.
- They often read a great deal on their own, sometimes preferring non-traditional books and magazines.
- They enjoy timely one-on-one adult conversations and interactions.
- They may show keen powers of observation or have an eye for important details.
- They often have a “sense of the significant” and enjoy philosophical musings and ethical debates.
- They often take great pleasure in intellectual activity and enjoy intellectual banter and gamesmanship.
- They may have well-developed powers of abstraction, conceptualization, and synthesis; these Decathletes tend to be successful writers.
- They readily see cause-effect relationships and can make interdisciplinary connections.
- They often display a questioning attitude and seek information for its own sake as much as for its usefulness.
- They are often skeptical, critical, and evaluative—sometimes even a bit cynical. They are quick to spot inconsistencies.
- Their social and intellectual lives often merge as their social groups are shaped by their hobbies and extracurricular involvement.
- They often have a large storehouse of information about a variety of topics (sometimes quite diverse and trivia-based) and rather quick recall of that information.
- They often have a disdain for memorization, but can memorize quite effectively when so inclined.
- They readily grasp underlying principles and can often make valid generalizations about events, people, or objects.
- They may prioritize the abstract over the concrete—for example, preferring overarching concepts and ideas to organizational matters or timeliness.

compete in the Decathlon for more than one year must prepare an original speech for each year. Coaches should work closely with their students in selecting an appropriate topic for their prepared speeches. It is best to avoid topics that are controversial, especially dealing with politics or religion, and adolescent issues.

- Length: 3½ to 4 minutes.
- Time signals will be used.
- Note cards may be used, but the speech must not be read.
- Props may not be used.

Impromptu Speech (included in most competitions)

- Topic: Students select a topic from a list of three impromptu topics.
- Length: 1½ to 2 minutes.
- Preparation time: One minute will be allowed for mental preparation.
- Time signals will be used.
- Notes that students make on their note cards may be used.
- Props may not be used.

The impromptu event can be stressful for Decathletes. Coaches will want to allow lots of practice time for their students, first with their teammates, then possibly in some of their classes, and finally with a panel of judges (teachers, counselors, etc.) in simulated competitions. The more practice the students get, the more comfortable they will be on the competition day. Coaches must not ignore this event.

Well in advance of the local competition, coaches should check with the competition manager regarding the format and rules for the local competition. These events will vary from competition to competition.

See the Academic Decathlon Study Guide for additional information regarding the speech event.

Interview

- Judging: Students will usually be judged by a panel of two or three judges who will use an established rubric that appears on the official Scantron scoring sheet. See Exhibit F. One of the judges will serve as timer. The judges and the student will be seated during the interview.
- Time: 4 to 7 minutes
- Guidelines for the judges regarding questions and conversations will generally be limited to the following: high school studies and activities, career and college plans, preparation and experiences in the Decathlon, travel, role models, and influential persons. In many competitions, students are asked to complete Student Activities Sheets or Resumes that list school and community activities, and these sheets are then given to the judges prior to the interview for their use in formulating appropriate questions.

This event can also be stressful for the students, and coaches should not neglect preparing their students for it. Provide many opportunities for mock interviews. As the event gets closer, simulate the actual interview process by providing adult interview teams to work with the students. The more practice the students receive, the better prepared they are going to be for the actual competition.

Coaches should check with the local competition manager well in advance of the actual competition to determine the format that will be used for the Super Quiz™ as well as to ascertain the number of questions used in this event at their state. The students need to be prepared for this event. Because it is a public event, it can cause anxiety for students.

A Winning Strategy for a Successful Team

Success is a product of hard work and nothing else.