

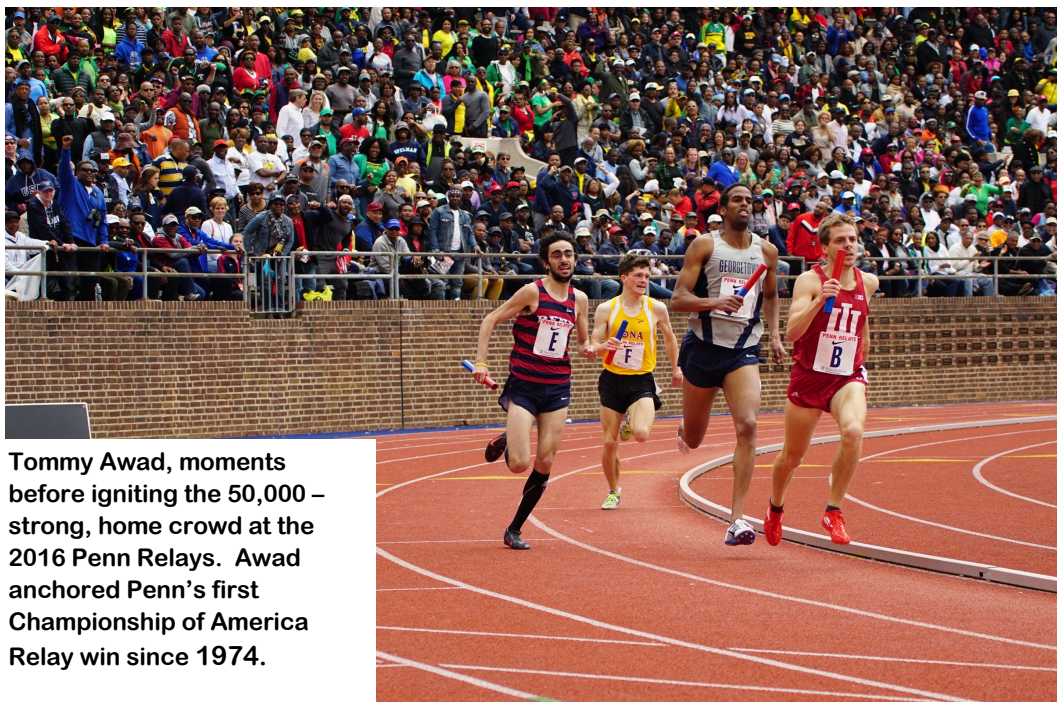


## ***The Winning Mindset*** **Tommy Awad**

**Purpose:** The purpose of CTCs *The Winning Mindset* is to collect and present articles by accomplished athletes, coaches, and business leaders in an effort to provide our readers with valuable insight into successful training, racing, business, and the characteristics of a high-performance mindset.

We strive to show the reader that many of the base principles of successful athletes and leaders apply outside of the sporting world as well. We value honest author perspectives and purposefully avoid asking too many questions that may steer the conversation into a predictable / expected outcome. Readers are encouraged to scrutinize our articles, identify patterns, and to appreciate differences.

**Tommy Awad is the [all-time](#) Ivy League record holder in the mile (3:57.03) and standout collegiate 1500m (3:37.75), 3000m (7:54), and 5000m (13:33) runner while at the University of Pennsylvania from 2012 - 2016. Tommy and his team earned an NCAA Cross Country Championship appearance and a Penn Relays Championship of America victory in the 4 x Mile. Individually, Tommy won multiple Ivy League titles, finished 3<sup>rd</sup> in the 2016 NCAA Mile, and competed in the 2016 U.S. Olympic Trials in the 1500m.**



**Tommy Awad, moments before igniting the 50,000 – strong, home crowd at the 2016 Penn Relays. Awad anchored Penn’s first Championship of America Relay win since 1974.**

All Photos: Bill Shearn Photography

**CTCs Request:** Tommy was asked to write a casual response, with the 18-22 year-old aspiring runner / audience in mind, that summarizes the key moments in his development as a collegiate runner.

After Tommy's post, we'll provide some of the Xs and Os relative to his HS and Collegiate training and racing. Enjoy!

**Tommy's Response:**

For those that don't know me, my name is Tommy Awad and I am a former Track/XC runner for The University of Pennsylvania in the great city of Philadelphia. I wanted to take this time to discuss a few moments in my career that were significant to my progression as a runner. You do not wake up one day and you're racing Olympians; these things build up over time. Very often, people look back at a runner's career and remember the major wins and records. In my case, people point out my 4xMile Championship of America race at the Penn Relays and my Ivy League Record as my main accomplishments, but I believe other moments are the truly memorable ones.

The big races are great to remember, but those only show the results. I got to that point because of other races and moments that people may not know about. I want to highlight some of those moments and give insight into my mindset as I was working my way up to the runner I ultimately became.

My freshman year of college was both exciting and challenging. My first XC season was a struggle; I had to get used to the longer distances of the 8k and 10k. Pushing through those races put me in the best shape of my life so far. Indoor season went well too; I ran 8:10 for 3k at our conference meet, 7 seconds faster than my PR, which I think came as a surprise to me and my coach. The outdoor season is where things started to change. My team was heading down to the Raleigh Relays where I was going to run my first track 5k of my collegiate career.

Before our trip, I spoke to my coach about my race and strategy. He told me that I would be running in the second heat in order to be in a race that I can win. He thought I deserved to be in the top section, but valued the experience of racing for the win. This was a common theme throughout my career and team.

My coach always valued racing well and competing for the win over running races just to hit times. I rarely heard my coach yell splits to me or my teammates. The goal was always to compete and focus on winning your race. If you win your race, the times will come. I could write a whole article about being too tied to the watch, but that is for another day. We also thought about time goals

heading into this race. The goal was to at least break 14:30 with the upside of breaking 14:20 as a dream day. To me, this seemed like a good estimate of where I would be. I liked the plan and took the bus down to NC State where things did not go as planned.

On a side note, I should point out that my collegiate coach, Steve Dolan, was probably the biggest reason for my success as a runner in college. His training worked extremely well for me and I think he is one of the best minds in the sport. I am extremely grateful for his time and dedication to my success when I was at Penn.

Back to the race, I do not really remember my splits, but I remember going into the last lap behind the leader at 13:04 and thinking “hey, I’m having a good one.” I ended up winning in 14:04, much faster than I ever dreamed of running in my collegiate career. I had only ever broken 16 minutes for 5k once in high school and just nearly broke 14 minutes in my first collegiate 5k ever. My head was spinning. Coach Dolan was pumped after the race, telling me we need to prepare for the NCAA regionals to try to make the NCAAs. My dad thought they made a mistake on the online results because he did not think I could run that fast! It was a lot to take in for an 18 year-old who finished 36th at his conference championships in XC to all of a sudden be in contention to make NCAAs.

- Looking back on my career, this moment was one of the most important moments for me as a runner. Nobody remembers me for this race, but this is always the first race I think of when I look back on college.

I started to believe that I could be better than good - that I could be one of the best. I began to realize my potential as a runner and it spring boarded me into taking my running more seriously than before. For a lot of runners, making that jump from being competitive in your conference to being one of the best runners in the NCAA is tough. It is hard to feel like you belong among the best in the nation. People have moments where they show that potential, but when they race elite runners, they fall flat. For me, this race made me believe I belonged among the best. After this race, I knew I shouldn't race being scared of the big guys. Now I was someone people should be worried about.

That race was a special moment in my progression, but there is another race that can give more detail into my mindset as a runner. Fast forward to my sophomore year where I was heading into the outdoor season coming off a decent indoor season. I put up some good times, but I was not in a super-fast race that showed everything I had. I was still holding some of my cards. I made a return trip to Raleigh where I won the fast heat breaking 13:50.



**Sophomore Tommy Awad, with a breakout win at the 2014 Raleigh Relays 5000m. Awad dropped 16 seconds off his PR with a 13:48. Less than a month later, Awad would run a 3:58 mile at the Penn Relays.**

The Raleigh race was a solid start, but my coach and I knew there was more to be had in the 5k. After my race, my coach told me that I would be running in the ODM mile and that I have a shot at breaking 4:00 at the Penn Relays. I was not thinking about the mile since we race 1500m outdoors, but he thought this would be a great opportunity for me in front of the home crowd. One thing I never did as a runner was second guess my coach's training or ideas. Believing in your training is highly important to being a good runner. If you begin to doubt your training or coach's ability, it will be harder to have confidence on the starting line. I would do anything my coach said and his plan sounded good to me.

Two weeks out from Penn Relays, I ran a 1500m in 3:42, which converts to around 4:00. The week of the relays, my coach told me that as long as the race was paced properly, I should be able to run under 4:00, but, regardless of time, race for the win.

He also gave me the same race plan that we used for 99% of races:

- Hang in the pack,
- Be in the race when it starts to move, and
- Take the lead only when you can take it to the finish.

With the plan in place, I went into the race with high expectations and was lucky enough to deliver.

I took the W in front of the home crowd in 3:58. I was neck and neck with the leader for the last 100 meters, making it a really exciting finish. Breaking 4:00 at Franklin Field was a surreal experience. My indoor season did not catch any eyes from a national standpoint, but this race definitely did.



Breaking 4:00 was obviously very exciting, but for me, it was just a part of the process. I kept doing the same training as always with my coach. We did not put extra stake in this race. We knew I could break 4:00 and needed the right environment to make it happen. I did not switch my training to become a miler after this and never viewed myself as a miler. Actually, I ended up racing the 10k at Heps a week later.

This race shows that runners should not put themselves in a box. I hear people say things like “I’m a 10k guy” or “I’m a miler.” I hate that mindset. For me, I viewed myself as a distance runner. I would race anything from the 1500 to the 10k. It is important for runners to not pigeon hole themselves into one event. People have a best event, but to only think you can be successful at one event is limiting. My training focused on all areas of my running. I had days where I did long tempos, I had days where we grinded 5k paces, and I had days where we spiked up and ran five 400s really fast. I wanted to be a jack of all trades and if you take a look at the best runners in the country, they can all run fast in a lot of events.

The main reason I grew as a runner from these experiences is what I learned from the races, not what I strategized or visualized ahead of time. We always kept the race strategy very simple. So simple that I summarized my race strategy for nearly all my races in one sentence.

A question I get quite often is if I had any routines the day of my race. The answer is no. Sometimes life throws you curveballs and you cannot do everything you want to on a given day. I did whatever I needed to do on that given day, and it changed depending on how I was feeling. Sometimes I listened to music before a race. Sometimes I read a book. Sometimes I did a lot of strides before getting onto the line. Sometimes I hardly did any. I did whatever felt right at the moment. It is easy to overthink things when it comes to running, so my focus was always to keep things as simple as possible and just go with whatever the race threw at me.

I never dreamed I would be the runner I became. I went to Penn to get a great education since I figured I would never go pro. Racing Olympians, winning races in front of nearly 50,000 home fans at Franklin Field, and traveling the world were not things I thought I would do before going to Penn. I did not have the family legacy of some runners who seem destined to become greats. For me, I was just a kid who happened to be good at distance running. It is important to note that most of the top American runners were a lot like me. They never thought running would take them so far, and we all start out as some kid going out for track in high school because we think we might be good at it. If there’s one thing I want you to take away from this, it’s that anything can happen and sometimes things work out better than you ever expect them to.

End of article.

Follow-up questions and information by **Rob Berry, CTC**

## **Tommy Awad**

### *A Look at the Numbers*

Year	1500m	Mile	3000m	5000m	10000m
2016	3:37.75	3:57.03	8:09	13:41	
2015	3:40.68	4:00.2	7:54	13:33	
2014	3:42.89	3:58.34	8:04	13:48	29:26
2013	3:48	4:04.7 (C)	8:10	14:04	
2012		4:13 (C)	8:25 (c)	15:06	
2011	4:01	4:14 (c)	8:31 (c)		
2010	4:15	4:34 (c)	8:53 (c)		
2009		4:44 (c)	9:41 (c)		

(C) = CONVERTED

**1) RB: How long were your five longest runs in high school?**

TA: The longest run I did in high school was on a recruiting trip when I went 14. 2<sup>nd</sup> - 5<sup>th</sup> were probably between 13-12 miles.

**2) RB: How many miles were your five longest weeks in high school?**

TA: In high school, I put up a few weeks between 60-65, so the five longest weeks were within that range. I did not hold 60s in season, but in the summers I definitely had a few weeks at that point.

**3) RB: How long were your five longest runs in college?**

TA: My freshman year I did an 18 miler and after that, decided to max my long run at 16 for the rest of my career. Sophomore year and on, I just kept my long run at 16 for the most part.

**4) RB: How many miles were your five longest weeks in college?**

TA: Again, I am just going to throw out ranges, but those weeks were between 85-80 miles. My highest week ever was 87 or 88 but that was post college.

**5) RB: You had significant improvement between 2010 and 2011. What factors do you attribute to that improvement?**

TA: Short story, when I was a sophomore, there was a junior on the team who I did not like very much. He was a really selfish runner and did not care about his teammates, which rubbed me the wrong way. Going into my junior year, I wanted to beat him and be our top guy. That was the moment I first really put a lot into running. I put in a relatively large summer of training for myself and I think those months of taking my training really seriously allowed me to get to a different level.

6) RB: Do you have any time trials in college in the 400m or 800m, whether in practice or a meet?

If not, what do you think your times would have been with a couple specific races at that distance?

TA: I remember doing a 1000m time trail my sophomore year, and I ran about 2:24 or 2:25.

400: I think on my best day, I could have run 49 high.

800: Again, on my best day maybe 1:49 high. All speculation though. I raced one 800 ever in college, so I do not have that same strategic edge that I may have in my other events.

7) RB: What were your bread and butter workouts that you used often in high school?

TA: In high school, I did a lot of interval training. Worked out on the track 3 times a week usually. One workout I remember doing a lot was 6x800. Usually took 3-3:30 minutes recovery and ran those 800s probably a touch faster than 2 mile race pace. We also would always do a 5 or 6 by lapper workout (our track was 5 laps to the mile) with 1 minute recovery in spikes. We did that a few times a year and that was always the hardest workout of the year, but also really fun.

8) RB: What were the common workouts you benefited from in college?

TA: My favorite college workout was the following:

2 x mile at threshold (1 minute recovery); followed by 4x800 at 5k pace (2:00 recovery); followed by 2x broken thousand (500, 300, 200. Recovery was jog the next distance); Hands down my favorite workout.

9) RB: What are your career / occupational ambitions now?

TA: Now, I think I am searching for that. I am currently coaching/grad school at Wesleyan University and I am trying to figure out what the next step should be for me. When I stopped running, I had no idea what my next focus should be since running was the main

focus of my life for so many years. Where I am now is a good spot, but I am still searching for that next big thing for me.

10) RB: Has lessons from athletics played any role in your life in the workplace?

TA: Absolutely. How I approached running is how I approach a lot of factors in my life. Sometimes this is beneficial and sometimes it is not, but the one big thing I have learned about myself is that I am 100% or 0%. If I am doing something, I am either all in or I do not want any part of it. That's how I am with work/hobbies. The moment I realized I did not want to be 100% in running anymore was the day I stopped. That is just the kind of person I am.

RB: As a parent of athletic and competitive kids, and as a former youth coach – I have witnessed (and been part of) the good, the bad, and the questionable regarding parental involvement and impact.

I asked for some recollections by Tommy's parents - his dad, Tom Awad, provided the following:

In the late summer of 2008 while sitting in my living room my eighth-grade son asked me, "So what do you think if I try out for cross country instead of soccer when I start Chaminade." Having coached him in soccer, basketball and taken him to a couple local 5k races I knew he had decent endurance. So, I was glad to support his new endeavor. Thanks to his hard work and some excellent high school coaching he had a solid four-year career.

I was never one of those parents who thought his child would be the next Michael Jordan or Michael Phelps (his twin sister was a swimmer in high school). Fast forward to the University of Pennsylvania and everything accelerated. Although the 14:04 his Freshman year was surprising I never could have imagined where it would all lead. Even after he won the U.S.A 5,000 meter championships and qualified for Team USA for the Pan Am Games in Colombia I was still not convinced.

When he broke the 4 minute mile as a sophomore in front of thousands at the Penn Relays, there was no escaping that he had a chance to have a special running career. What a day that was! College turned out to be a time of commitment, more phenomenal coaching, and tough as nails racing. Wish it could have gone on forever.

RB: In an effort to help paint a fuller picture for our CTC readers we reached out to Tommy's head coach at Penn, along with two of his teammates. Below, you'll find their reflections on the rise of the Penn distance team and working with Tommy Awad.



Steve Dolan, Director of Track & Field / XC, University of Pennsylvania:

SD:

As I reflect back over my coaching career, there are a few elite level athletes that immediately come to mind. Tommy Awad is certainly one of those special competitors. The experiences and memories I share with Tommy are something I'll cherish for the rest of my life.

It's hard to put into words the special ability that Tommy possesses but those that have seen him race at his best have witnessed it. It's some combination of determination, toughness, competitive spirit, work ethic, confidence and physical talent.

The level of performance that most runners display in a race is often relatively predictable based on the types of workouts they completed leading into the event. Tommy was often an exception to this norm since he had the amazing ability to take it to the next level when the gun went off. Don't get me wrong, Tommy trained hard and ran many outstanding workouts, but his gift was the ability to go to a place that very few runners can go in competition.

Tommy was an exceptionally versatile runner that excelled in cross country and on the track. He won multiple Ivy League titles in all three competitive seasons. These titles ranged from the Mile to 10,000 meters. In addition, Tommy won the Olympic Development Mile and anchored our team to a win in the 4 x Mile at the Penn Relays. He also set numerous Penn and Ivy League records and was a First Team All-American at both the NCAA Cross Country and Track & Field Championships.

I remember being interviewed after one of Tommy's races and the reporter asked me what I was thinking as I watched the race. Having seen Tommy find a way to win time and time again the first thing that came to my mind was, "You never bet against Tommy Awad in the last 400!" Tommy's competitive spirit was inspiring to all and really set the tone for our entire team during his years at Penn.

Chris Hatler, another standout athlete on that memorable team (1:48.9 800 / 3:39.08 1500 / 3:59.21 Mile) was a year behind Tommy at Penn:

CH:

Similar to Tommy, I went into Penn for a solid education without any expectation of being a competitive runner on the national scale. Like the rest of my class, I climbed aboard the Quaker ship during a coaching transition, with Steve Dolan starting his first year at Penn during my senior year of high school. After just 3 months on campus under his tutelage, I PR'd in the 5k— en route to an 8k!

The team as well as myself continued to see huge jumps in improvement from year to year. A team that was last in Ivy League XC qualified for NCAAs and won the conference title just a few short years later. I credit this spike in performance to two things.

Firstly, Dolan was a master of having everyone buy in to his training regime. It was all about consistent individualized buildup over time. This allowed everyone to be personally successful, as opposed to grinder programs where each athlete runs 100 mile weeks, and whoever doesn't get chewed up and spit out succeeds. As such, everyone trusted in Coach Dolan's plans and each other, because we all knew we had done the right amount of work to get us to the starting line healthy and hungry.

The second thing I contribute the spike to is Tommy. He raised the bar for what was possible. Without him, I would have been content with being a top 5 team in XC and scoring a point or two in conference track. But watching him become one of the best inspired me to ask myself: "why not me?" Why can't I be a Heps champion? Why can't I break the 4 minute mile? His dedication and mentorship showed every member of our motley crew that as long as they put in the work and kept faith that good things were coming, they would be more successful than they could have ever imagined.

Clark Shurtleff, a fellow 2016 classmate of Tommy, and athlete on the XC and track team:

CS:

An important part of our success as a team was leadership. This started from the top, but it was most successful because it wasn't intrusive. The goal of our team's leadership, from both coaches and athletes, was to provide us the tools to create our own success. From a coaching perspective, Coach Dolan didn't micromanage his athletes. He encouraged us to have days without formal practice, where the athletes were responsible for ourselves. This was doubly effective - it fostered a sense of individual ownership and encouraged the team to look out for each other. On those days, the quality of your training reflected your personal desire to improve. This mindset was reflected by leaders on the team. Tommy wasn't going to get in your face and force you to do anything you didn't want to do. But he was going to set the example, to demonstrate what excellence looked like, and to help remind us what we were working toward.

This leadership approach is a real risk. There is always the danger that the days without practice will be ineffective, wasting valuable training time. It relies heavily on the self-motivation of the individuals in the group. But it also means that each member of the team is responsible for their own success. When they work hard and see their teammates working hard, they know it isn't driven by any external pressure, but due to their personal desire to succeed. And when a group can look around and know that everyone is pulling in that same direction, the results can be powerful.

As Coach Dolan liked to tell us, success is contagious. Seeing your teammates achieve their goals inspires you to do the same. More importantly, knowing *how* they did it allows you to apply those

strategies to yourself. And as individuals seek their personal success together, their efforts combine to create a successful team. I think this gets at the major lesson on leadership I took away from my time at Penn. Effective leaders do two things well: provide people with the tools to be excellent and a model of what excellence looks like. Sometimes those roles are fulfilled by different leaders on a team; in our case, Coach Dolan gave us the tools, and Tommy was our model. Together, they led a group that built upon each other's successes to form a team that accomplished many of its goals and left a strong foundation for the future of Penn track and cross country.