Don't Exercise—Train!

Improvement and Injury Prevention Require Slow, Steady Increases in Training.

BY GERARD PEARLBERG

In chapter 16 of my book *Run Tall, Run Easy, the Ultimate Guide to Better Running Mechanics*, I discuss the concept of sequential, progressive development of the runner through systematic training, as opposed to rudderless exercise that all too often produces frustration and underachievement.

As a professional coach interviewing new athletes, I have a key objective of determining the content of their running programs. I find with few exceptions that the structure of the programs is dangerously close to overtraining from too-high mileage and/or intensity and density (recovery setup) or undertraining resulting in little training effect (training effect meaning optimal stress followed by optimal recovery, which equals optimal performance).

While the abilities of individual athletes vary greatly, increased fitness, speed, or combinations thereof are at the heart of most runners' motivations. Whatever the motivation, whether the runner be a professional or an amateur, competitive or recreational, a common objective remains present at all time—the desire to avoid injury.

Injury is to runners what kryptonite is to Superman—the archenemy! It is the biggest hindrance to development for the fitness enthusiast or aspiring Olympian alike.

Each day, week, and month have only a certain number of training sessions that can be completed. During the course of a 31-day month, a runner who runs four times per week has 19 to 20 opportunities to create change and establish progress in fitness. If two of these runs are for 30 minutes and the other two are 40 minutes and 60 minutes, respectively, total goal running time for that week is two hours and 40 minutes. Add to this two resistance strength-training sessions of 60 minutes each plus one alternative strength session such as Pilates or yoga in addition to a 60-minute cross-training session, and we have almost six hours of training that needs to be managed each week.

DO THE MATH

There are 168 hours in a week. Allowing for eight hours sleep per day leaves 112 hours. Take out eight hours a day for five days of work and this number is

reduced to 72 hours. Another five hours per week of driving to and from work leaves 68 hours.

Each day you need time to eat and to socialize; take out four hours per evening and one hour per morning; your available time is now 33 hours. Now, achieving six hours of training within an available 33 hours may seem fairly easy, but my time lines have not allowed for extraneous distractions such as visits to the grocery store, getting the car serviced, shuttling the kids to soccer practice, and so forth.

While my data are generic and simplistic, they do highlight that effective, sequential training is paramount if we are to manage our time effectively and above all remain injury free. I realize, of course, that even with the best of intentions and the most superior of programs, injuries are bound to occur.

My point is that we simply do not need to add to the risk by random acts of exercising without direction and management, at best struggling to fit everything around our already very busy lives and limited available time.

The answer is methodical training, known in coaching circles as "periodization." This is a term that means separating your training into different periods of time such as sessions, microcycles, mesocycles, and macrocycles, terminologies that cover training from a single daily session up to an annual plan.

Choosing short-term (seven to 30 days), midterm (30 to 60 days), and long-term (60 days and beyond) goals is essential to our success. In addition, the goals must be intrinsic, not extrinsic, to ensure long-term adherence and consistency. The desire to engender change must come from internal fortitude. Seeking the approval of others, wishing to please someone else in the way we look, and wanting ourselves to lose weight are all too often doomed to failure.

Training Periods

Session: A singular or individual training session.

Microcycle: A shorter segment of your training program, typically seven days.

Mesocycle: An intermediate segment of your training program, often allowing enough time for one adaptation period (the length of time required, physiologically speaking, to benefit from a given workout), typically 14 to 21 days.

Macrocycle: A longer period of time often described as your training season, for example, cross-country season or summer time racing season for 5K/10K races or, very often, the overall training period leading up to an including a half-marathon or marathon race. Typically two to three months and sometimes longer.

In training, it is key to pick a tangible focal point, such as the desire to walk or run around your block, to complete a local 5K race, to be able to join your friends on their regular midweek run, or, like many runners these days, to complete a marathon—a goal, by the way, that I strongly recommend be positioned under the long-term category of periodization.

THINK LIKE AN ATHLETE

Once you've determined your goals, the next change to be made is to alter your view of yourself. The title "athlete" is not exclusive to those competing in the classic 16 days of summer every four years. You are an athlete if you put the chips and beer down, get off the couch, lace up your shoes, and head out the door to compete with yourself and your demons against a measured course for time or distance. If you think of yourself as an athlete, you increase your chances of making better decisions throughout the day in terms of nutrition, hydration, rest, and even the company you keep. These better decisions help reduce the risk of injury!

Time is key, so establish the best time of day for you to train, and keep to the routine. If you plan on strength training but are pinched for time, join a health club that is within your daily running distance and run to the club, train, and then run home. This is an excellent way to make sure you train for strength and increases adherence to your program.

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The great former Stanford University track and field coach and age-group world-class sprinter Payton Jordan once told me how he managed to run a 30-second 200-meter interval at age 82. "G.P., remember these five principles that you must always incorporate into your program:

- "Have fun.
- "Continue to develop your breathing capacity by taking in long, slow breaths through your nose and longer out breaths through your mouth.
- "Continue to develop your strength.
- "Continue to develop your flexibility.
- "Continue to develop your speed and never stop working on it!"

These are great principles to remember, and Payton Jordan gives you a great deal to think about.

Key Training Principles

- Follow hard day/easy day method
- Take a recovery week every third or fourth week
- Train at varying paces one or two days a week
- Allow one to two weeks per year as an off-season

It is essential that you train with a hard day/easy day method and allow for a recovery week every third or fourth week to make progress in your fitness. Training at varying paces one or two days a week will help improve your mechanics and your strength and will allow your base pace (the pace that you can run comfortably at for long periods of time) to become faster—tangible proof that you are developing as an athlete.

Be sure to allow one to two weeks a year as a transition (an off-season) to allow for restoration. Some serious athletes take a whole month off during the winter.

Remember, optimal stress followed by optimal recovery equals optimal performance. Optimal performance is achieved only when you are not injured. Systematic, progressive training in the image of an athlete will significantly reduce your risk of injury.

Above all, never forget that you are an athlete!

Run tall, run easy.