

NOTES FOR 2:09 EVENTS TRAINING PLANS

All people have different levels of 'trainability' and natural potential. It is possible for complete beginners to make very rapid progress and move up the targets, while others find initially that they can't achieve the early training levels.

There are two golden rules whichever level of improver you find yourself: a) Build-up very gradually, and b) You must rest and recover before training becomes beneficial.

Building-up: Even if you come from a good level of fitness, trying to build-up too quickly will certainly get you injured. Running is a repetitive activity that involves your foot hitting the floor repeatedly with considerable force being transmitted up through the legs and into the lower back. The reason that experienced runners can handle such high levels of training is because they have taken years to get there and are conditioned. Your body adapts to new stresses and a product of regular running is that your bones will slowly harden and become more resilient to the new forces, but it takes time. Fit people beware: your engine (heart & lungs) may find it easy – but after a while your legs won't.

Rest & Recover: The natural thought is that you get better when you train hard. While that is not altogether untrue, the reality is that your body actually gets fitter while you are resting. Here's how it works: during hard exercise your body gets tired, waste products build up and energy levels fall as you have used up fuel - you are technically less able than before you started training! If you continued the same level of activity over several days you would become progressively more tired and eventually you will breakdown – either with injury or illness. However, when you stop and rest your body starts to repair the damage, which it will do to a higher level than before as the body recognises a need to adapt to the new stresses that you're subjecting it to.

Frequency: A regular training pattern is more important than any one session. There is a cumulative effect from training regularly which is not achieved by doing all of your training on one or two days each week.

Going the Distance: For all but the highly trained it is not sensible to try to run the full marathon distance before the big day. Most runners should aim at a target time of 2 to 2hrs 30mins as 'Time-on-Feet'. The distance run in this time isn't critical, but for many a run of 20 miles about 4 weeks before the marathon is good for confidence.

Your training is done to encourage physiological changes in your body – one of these is the ability to use different forms of energy. The most efficient energy source is glycogen – basically a sugar stored in the muscles. This will last for about 1 ½ hrs of fairly rigorous exercise – like running – but less than that if running at a fast pace. At lower levels of exercise and after the glycogen has gone the body learns to use fat for energy – which we all have a big supply of.

The problem is that the body does not convert fat to energy very efficiently. However, it can be improved by doing runs of over 1 ½ hrs. The 2-hour runs have been found to be ideal (regardless of the distance covered in that time). It is sufficient time on your feet to help train the energy systems, it encourages local endurance in the leg muscles and joints and it teaches you how to run efficiently. The occasional run over 2 hours is good for confidence – but in general longer will not mean fitter as you will not recover adequately to do your other training.

Amount of rest: Some leading athletes appear not to rest at all – to run at world class level you have to achieve and survive high quantities of training. These are the fittest and most economical runners usually with huge backgrounds of training.

Initially, they are not like us; we expend enormous amounts of energy with each stride as the shock wave from each step knocks the wind out of your lungs. It is natural that you will feel more tired than these genetically gifted people and you must give sore legs time to recover. Over time your increasing fitness will make you more like them and you will be able to absorb more training.

How much rest is down to you, we all have different needs, but a rule of thumb is that if your muscles are sore to the touch in the two days after a hard session then should take a rest day or run easy until the soreness has gone. Avoid doing two consecutive hard days and aim for a pattern of hard, followed by rest, easy and steady before returning to hard.

Speed and ability are not necessarily good indicators of how efficient a runner you may be – slower runner's may simply not have the cardio-vascular system (heart & lungs) to run fast, but can run forever without getting injured. Conversely, plenty of fast runners regularly get injured because the bodywork is not as strong as the engine. Unfortunately, it is a suck-it-and-see situation, and you'll find out soon enough, but you can reduce the risks by keeping to a systematic programme with built-in rest days.

Your Health: Everyone should be aware that there is a risk involved with active sport – heart defects leading to death being the most serious. That scare out of the way – for the vast majority of people active sport will improve your health and wellbeing.

Before setting out on an exercise regime you are well advised to visit your doctor for a check-up. A good doctor will be pleased to see you and should give you some advice on setting out – particularly if you have had a health problem like asthma, diabetes or suffer from carrying excess weight.

The down side of training for a marathon is that the daunting nature of the event requires you to take on more exercise than is normally advised. While sensible levels of exercise will improve your health, the levels needed to train for a marathon can lead to your immune system being suppressed. You will notice that sleep can become more difficult, your legs don't recover from runs as quickly, and your resting pulse rate may be slightly higher than normal - all of which may be precursors to sore throats, colds that won't go away or flu. If you've gone this far – you must stop and recuperate. When you start up again start at a lower level and feel your way back gradually – but beware – where you were before is what got you ill in the first place!

Food & Drink: A healthy diet and high fluid intake are essential. Your body burns carbohydrate for the energy you need to run, it also needs protein to help it recover from the damage done by hard exercise and it needs vitamins and minerals to maintain its health. So what you need is a good balanced diet. Make sure you are taking in plenty of carbohydrate but make sure you are not surviving just on carbohydrate – a plate of pasta on its own isn't a balanced diet. If you are taking in a lot of fruit and veg, yet still get colds you may need to look at vitamin supplements – but they are not essential if your general health is good.

Liquid is essential. Even on a cold day you will lose a lot of liquid through both sweating and breathing – if this does not get replaced your body cannot function properly. So make sure you drink regularly, before, during and after exercise – either water or an isotonic sport drink, the choice is down to taste although research does show that liquid is absorbed more quickly during exercise when taken as an isotonic drink.

Race Practice: For the beginner, taking part in a couple of 'pre-Marathon' events is an important part of the learning process. racing is very different from running on your own: your perception of pace will alter and you will almost certainly run quicker in the first few miles than you thought, and you will experience running with several thousand people trying to step on your heels or stopping dead in front of you. The experience can be frustrating if you are unprepared, so practice the whole thing about getting there, queuing for the loo (several times) and finding the start. A 10km race is a good starting point and a half marathon in the last month will give you some confidence about doing the distance and will give you an idea of your potential marathon time so that you can plan your pace strategy.

Tapering Down: As training can take up to two weeks before becoming effective you don't need do much in the last two weeks. It is far better to let the body recuperate and build up its energy reserves in this period. There is a balance to be found: ease back too much and you will start to lose training effect and begin to feel a little bit sluggish, too much and you are using important energy resources.

Start to reduce the quantity of training 2 weeks before the marathon, but maintain some faster running to keep you feeling 'sharp'. Keep some light training going even in the last week – it's good for confidence – but don't burn up valuable energy with unnecessary 'nervous' training at the last minute.

In the last 3 days concentrate on getting lots of carbohydrate inside you and keep fully hydrated by sipping water regularly. Take your last carbohydrate meal in the afternoon the day before the marathon so that it is digested properly, then before the race and have a light breakfast 3 hrs before the start.

Drink small amounts of water right up to start time and take 500ml of water on to the start line and drink it just before the gun is going to go off – it's the most valuable water you'll take on board all day. Then try to get a small amount of liquid at each drink station on the race course.

TERMINOLOGY:

Warm-up/Cool down: It is advisable to warm your muscles up before you start exercising hard, this will make it easier to perform and will help in prevention of injury. The cool down brings the body back to normal after exercise and helps stimulate blood flow to remove the waste created in the muscles during exercise – this will reduce the onset of stiffness the day after exercise and also help guard against injury.

If you are setting off for a walk or run, take the first 5 to 10mins at a very easy pace and gradually build up into your intended training pace. As the level of intensity of your training run increases then so does the need for a warm-up. A typical warm-up would be 5mins walking, 10mins jogging followed by gentle stretching of the main muscle groups. If you are going to be running full out in the session, 2 or 3 short sprints between the warm-up and just before starting the session will encourage a full range of motion.

After hard have exercise you will have a certain amount of waste left in the muscles and the muscles will shorten a little, a gentle jog cool down followed by some gentle stretching of the main muscle groups will help encourage blood flow to remove waste and return the muscles to their normal length.

Easy run pace: This should be very comfortable running speed and may actually be walking pace at first. Most of your running in the early stages should be at this level of effort – you are not being soft on yourself, you are forming a base so you can train harder later. Once you are established in your training routine this pace is used as active recovery between harder training days.

The effort is equal to 50 to 60% training level if working with a heart rate monitor. At this level of effort you are encouraging the body to use the fats in the blood as energy – this is an important process in making you a more efficient user of energy thus increasing the distance you can run before becoming depleted of the body's usual energy source: glycogen.

Steady Run: Running with more effort, but you should be in control and able to talk to people while running – often called 'conversation pace'. The long runs should be done at steady pace once you have developed your base fitness at the 'Easy Running Speed'. Equal to 60 to 75% training level if working with a heart rate monitor.

Tempo or Threshold Running: These runs are done at a speed that you can just about maintain for a long period of time – tempo running is specific to the speed you might run a race, i.e. projected marathon pace, half marathon pace or 10km race pace. Threshold pace is the pace that you can maintain for 1 hr without becoming anaerobic - it means that your heart is supplying exactly the oxygen needs of the working muscles – anything faster and you would produce lactic acid and be forced to slow down. For most people it is around 85% of working heart rate or equal to your 10 mile or half marathon speed.

Repetition Running: These are sustained efforts at 10km speed or faster which are held for 3 to 10mins. In between the efforts you should take 3 to 5mins recovery (best taken as a slow jog rather than standing still) – repeat the efforts 4 to 6 times.

Interval Running: Short faster bursts of speed (1 mile to 5km speed) held for between 1 and 3mins. Recovery jog should be equal to the effort time (i.e. 1 min fast – 1 min slow – 1 min fast, etc) – repeat 10 to 20 times depending on length of the effort.

Fartlek: Swedish word meaning speed play. This is an ad hoc form of interval training where you run fast and slow as you feel – taking in sprints up hills, down hills, different surfaces (grass, sand, road).

Hill Running: These can take two forms:

Hill Repetitions – usually on a moderate slope that you can run up without dramatically altering your running style. You simply sprint up and jog down – typically the hill will be around 400m long.

Kenyan Hills – run on a circuit of between 800m to 1,000m with an equal amount of ascent and descent. You will run in a continuous fashion around the circuit for a period of time, typically 20mins, maintaining the same effort on both the up and down sections.