

Periodization: Why Am I Doing This Workout Today?

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You've been there: A few miles into a run, you are wondering to yourself, "Why am I running today?" Maybe you ran long the day before. Perhaps you have an especially challenging workout the next day. Whatever the reason, you are not sure exactly why you are doing a particular workout on a given day. Likewise, you might have no idea how hard you should be running, or whether you should be running at all.

Many runners tend to be shortsighted with their running plans, focusing solely on weekly mileage or "time improvement." What they are missing is the *reason* for a given workout, or for a series of workouts.

Unless you are running just to run - and many of us do exactly that - you are probably training for a specific race, or a series of races. In that case, every workout in your training schedule should have a certain purpose. More importantly, if you have a coach, your coach should be able to tell you why you are doing that particular workout.

This is not to say that you must plan every run with inflexible certainty. You should vary your training with different distances, paces, and routes. However, you should step back, look at your overall goals for the season or the year, and plan your training on a broader platform. Commonly referred to as "periodization," the optimal training method for any race distance is to go through different phases - usually lasting several weeks - where you focus on different aspects of your running.

Think in terms of weeks, not days.

Whether you are planning to run a 5K or an ultramarathon, think of your training schedule as a series of weeks that will start with your "base phase," sometimes also referred to as your "aerobic" phase. Consult any number of books, online sources, coaches or veteran runners, and you will get a variety of opinions about how long your base period should last, how many miles you should run, and how hard you should run. But the one point upon which they will all agree is that *you need to build your base*. Likewise, they'll be consistent on another key aspect: gradually increase your volume (total weekly miles) over time, and run at an *easy* pace.

The base period has several purposes, but the primary objective is to improve endurance. It is how beginners go from being able to run 1-2 miles up to 10 or more miles. The focus is not on gaining speed or boosting strength, although those do benefit from base training. The focus is on "building the aerobic engine" by gradually increasing distance and volume at a relaxed, easy pace. Some training plans break down the base phase into sub-phases, such as "Base 1, Base 2, Base 3," for example.

There are no one-size-fits-all regimens for base building - runners have different levels of conditioning, speed, strength, and stamina. Ask a coach or read a few publications about

training, and you will find some guidance to help you plan your own schedule for base training. Most important, *think in terms of weeks* when it comes to your base building.

Following a series of weeks where you focus on your base training, you'll begin to notice improvements in your speed. That's a positive development to note, but it should not be the focus of your aerobic base work. Yes, it's nice that you can run a 3-mile route several minutes faster than you could a few weeks ago. But it should not be your daily goal to "beat yesterday's time." That will come in the next phase.

After the base, start building strength and stamina.

There are several commonly-used terms for the next periodization phase.

- build phase
- stamina phase
- pre-competition phase
- quality workout phase

Whatever you or your coach call it, the common component of this phase is that the workouts begin to increase **intensity**, with tempo runs, interval sessions, hill workouts, and other types of runs. At the same time, overall volume decreases (meaning the total number of weekly miles drops), or else remains flat in comparison to the linear increases in mileage that were common in the base period.

Typically, this period is much shorter than the base period. For example, a 16-week base period might be followed by a 5-week "build" period. Similarly, the frequency of workouts might decrease slightly, meaning that you will run fewer days each week than during your base phase. The reason for this is simple - your body needs more time to recover from the demands of high intensity workouts.

It is important to note that not all of your workouts will be high-intensity during this phase. Indeed, a lot of your weekly mileage should continue to be at your aerobic pace. There is also a need for what are called "recovery runs," sometimes referred to as "shuffles." The purpose of these especially slow and easy runs, which typically are scheduled for the days immediately after hard workouts or very long runs, is to loosen up stiff, tired legs, and move oxygen and nutrients into the muscles for repair.

Where is the peak?

Most training plans take runners through a 2-4 week period called the "peak" period, where intensity and volume might come together right before a "taper" period that leads up to a target race. Some coaches prefer to lead runners to a "peak to the race" period, where the athletes hit their highest performance, i.e, their "peak," at the goal race itself.

This is the trickiest part of your training, especially if you are preparing for a series of races or a racing season that covers 2-3 months. After months of training, you want to make sure that you time your “peak” just right, so that you’re not peaking too early, or - worse - overtrained on race day.

This is where a coach can really help you prepare. Moreover, no single newsletter or magazine article can hand you the perfect “peak and taper” plan that will fit every runner’s needs. Generally, you want to give yourself enough time to rest between your “peak” and your goal race, but that amount of time varies depending on your experience level, your overall athletic ability, the length of your race, and even the time of year that you are racing. If you are experimenting with your first “periodization” plan, err on the side of too much rest (taper), rather than too little.

So, why am I doing this workout today?

Back to the initial question: “Why am I running today?” Whatever your answer, make sure that your workout is consistent with your periodization phase. Are you in the early weeks of your base training? If so, you shouldn’t be doing intervals on the track. Are you in the middle of your “build” period, where you are ramping up speed and intensity? If so, you might not want to be grinding out a hilly 10-miler the day after a grueling track session. Are you wondering why you’re scheduled for a 3-mile “recovery run” the day after a 20-miler?

If you cannot answer the question, ask your coach. If your coach cannot answer the question...well, it might be time to find another coach!