

Don't Be A Running Lemming: Run With A Purpose

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The folk stories about lemmings (small rodents) jumping off cliffs in some sort of bizarre mass suicide are just that - folks stories. However, lemmings often migrate in huge packs, and the Norway lemmings in Scandinavia sometimes do reach cliffs, stop, and then leap into the sea to continue their innate urge to migrate. As they swim across the sea, some drown as they mindlessly swim onward.

So what's a "running lemming," you ask? That is a runner who mindlessly runs with a group for a workout, sometimes pushing himself or herself much too hard, just because "that's what the group is doing today." While there are certainly many benefits to running with groups -- and definitely that is true with a group that has a common training objective -- runners should consider several factors before jumping into a training group.

A runner should look around at the group and ask a few questions, such as:

- Is this a beginner group that concentrates on fundamentals, or an "advanced" group that runs very fast intervals?
- What is the experience level and overall focus of this group - beginner triathletes, veteran marathoners, 5K/10K "weekend racers," or some mix of everything?
- Who is the "coach" of the group, and does that person design training programs for the runners, or does he or she simply tell everyone what to run that day?

One additional question, and perhaps the most important question, is "how often does this group run together, and why?" The answer to this question is critically important. If the group meets once per week ("how often") and is following a specific training program to a goal race or racing season ("why"), that is a much different answer than "we run twice a week, and we run hard because we like to and because that's what we do."

At this point, your author has to make a confession. I once coached a group of runners every Tuesday and Thursday, week after week, year-round, which did speed work on Tuesdays and hill workouts on Thursdays. Many runners showed up for this group, at times reaching upwards of 40 people, all doing the same workout at relatively the same intensity effort (albeit at different paces). Over time, the group began to separate into smaller groups with far different objectives. Some were marathoners looking to qualify for Boston. Others were sprint triathletes who needed some work on running efficiency. Many were simply long-time faithful group members who liked the camaraderie of the group. As I continued to coach these different groups outside of the Tuesday/Thursday setting, I began sending the marathoners and triathletes off to do other workouts, because what they needed was not being offered by this group. I ultimately reduced the group workouts to once per week, alternating speed work and hill workouts each week. The reason I did this was two-fold: first, I considered **what each group was training for**, and saw

that different groups needed much different workouts; second, I **listened to the experts** (and so should you). Not convinced? Read on.

What Are You Training For?

Unless you are running “just to run,” 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. If you are in the beginning stages of your “base” period, there really is no room for track intervals or high-intensity hill repeats. Likewise, if you are in the “building” weeks before a marathon, your training should have a good amount of threshold training, or “stamina” work, instead of short bursts of speed that are favored by many running groups on a track.

Many runners don’t follow any specific training plan at all, but merely design their training – for whatever distance they are targeting – based on these targets:

- weekly mileage
- weekend long run
- “intensity” work once or twice a week

Although this kind of training can help runners complete a goal race, it usually is not focused enough to yield optimal results.

The better method - and one that is “tried and true” in the running world - is to follow a training plan that (1) specifically targets a goal race, (2) sets key periods for different types of workouts, and (3) lays out very focused workouts that are designed with you and your optimal training pace in mind. With that type of training plan in hand, a runner who shows up for speed on Tuesday and hills on Thursday will quickly realize that those workouts don’t “fit” into the schedule.

Listen To The Experts.

If you are a runner who is training for a specific race, and you’ve never consulted any of the materials written by Pfitzinger, Daniels, McMillan, Higdon, Lydiard, or any of the other experts out there - do it soon. Although the methods advanced by each of these experts sometimes vary, you will no doubt learn something important from their writings.

Take a look at the training plans that the experts have developed. Do you see high intensity work (track/speed work and hill repeats) twice a week for 10, 15 or 20 weeks in any of them? No. What you will see are very specific plans that are deeply focused on proper training pace, the corresponding training “zone” on the calendar, and the overall goal of getting the runner prepared for the particular race – and pace – for which the training plan has been designed.

There are reasons why the experts don’t recommend seriously fast speed work followed by very hard hill repeats two or three days later. There’s not enough space in this article to lay out all of the reasons why, but rest assured that the experts would advise against that sort of training.

Don't Forget About Injury Risks.

Training plans do include intensity work, but usually the overall volume decreases (meaning the total number of weekly miles drops) or else remains flat in comparison to the linear or stair-stepped increases in mileage that are common in the base periods.

Also, the training periods that contain very high intensity work are typically much shorter than the base period. For example, a 16-week base period might be followed by a 5-week period that includes a lot of speed or hill work, but overall less mileage. In addition, 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. If you go out without direction into a training group week after week, month after month, "hitting it hard" two or more times a week, your chances of injury increase with every workout.

So, Am I Supposed to Quit My Running Group?

Absolutely not. Running groups provide terrific support, offer many sources of shared information and wisdom, and create opportunities to meet and learn from other runners. However, it is important not to fall into a "pack" mentality where you "do what the group is doing" just because that's what everyone else is doing.

If you are "running just to run," and you like the security and social offerings of a group, then by all means lace up your shoes and go run. Just remember to give yourself some recovery time on a regular basis, especially if the group tends to "go hard" more than once a week.

On the other hand, if you are training for a specific race, make sure that your workouts are consistent with your training phase. More importantly, keep an eye on your intensity level during workouts. "Hitting it hard" and trying to beat your training partners at every workout is probably not what you need. If you find yourself mindlessly pushing yourself harder and harder, without any sort of direction or purpose, stop and ask yourself if you feel like one of those Norway lemmings that are swimming into the sea. If the answer is yes, then it is time to find a coach or consult one or more training books to get yourself into an appropriate training regimen.

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