

Spring Is Time For Fall Marathon Base Work

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As the days grow longer and the weather starts to warm, runners hit the roads and trails preparing for spring and summer 5Ks, 10Ks, and triathlons. Fall marathon training is, for many, still weeks or months away.

But if you are targeting a fall marathon for a personal record, or perhaps a Boston qualifying time, then now - March, April and May - is the time to start preparing for that training. In essence, you are “training for your training” by establishing the foundation for your fall marathon that is still months away.

Most marathon training programs are 16-24 weeks long. Accordingly, marathoners typically identify their race date and work backwards to find their “start date” for training. The mistake these runners make is to overlook a critical period that should precede their formal training: the base work period. You should count back an *additional* 8-12 weeks from your “start date,” and use that time to do some solid base work.

Why Do Base Work?

The key to successful marathon training is build an enormous aerobic engine that is the platform upon which high-volume and high-intensity training is stacked. The training requires patience - the aerobic base period should be 8-12 weeks optimally, although shorter periods are fine depending on your overall level of fitness.

The running should be long and slow. All of it. Long, slow running increases the heart’s stroke volume, increases capillary density in the muscles, and triggers the production of more mitochondria in the muscle cells - the “powerhouses” that convert fuel into energy. Aerobic training can boost these adaptations significantly, turning a runner into a fat-burning aerobic machine.

This is where runners tend to lose patience and find themselves off track early, anxious to get to their “real” training. Again, patience is critical during this phase. You have to remind yourself that things are happening in your aerobic and muscular systems - at the cellular level - that will pay off down the road. In addition, the slow pace will make it easier to run all those miles week after week. Later, when the mileage and intensity ramp up, your ability to bear the load will be greatly enhanced if you stick to a regimen of “slow and low” during your base training.

How Fast - Or Slowly - Should I Run During Base Work?

A quick search of online resources for “base training” will yield a huge amount of articles, websites, books, and training programs for “aerobic base work.”. There is no “one-size fits all” plan out there, so it is best to find one and stick to it. Generally, the materials recommend using a heart rate monitor to measure level of effort, and to keep your heart rate anywhere from 60% to

80% of “max,” although loose guidelines like that are really of no help. Again, there are conflicting sources and programs out there, so the best advice is to find one, study it, learn from it, and follow it as best you can.

It will seem as if you are a “prisoner” to your heart rate monitor, because the pace will be ridiculously low. However, if you slow down and stay within the recommended “aerobic” or “base” heart rate zones, you will start to see results in a matter of a few weeks. More importantly, your success in the race will be derived largely from the work performed 24+ weeks prior to race day, i.e., the base-building phase.

Bottom line: Base work means a lot of “slow and low” running, meaning slow pace and low heart rate. No speed work, no hill workouts, almost zero intensity.

So What Do I Run During The Base Period?

Aim for consistency. Irregular run schedules and intermittent “days off” will slow the progress of the aerobic development. Likewise, throwing in some “hard days” of speed or hill work just to break the monotony will actually set you back a bit.

Runs during the base period should be based on time spent running in the appropriate “zone,” not based on weekly mileage. Below is a recommended schedule for runners who have the time and fitness to run 11 out of 14 days. It seems like a lot, but remember that the intensity is low and the goal is time, not miles.

Sat: 60-75 minutes in early base weeks, later 75-90 minutes

Sun: 30 minutes

Mon: 45-60 minutes

Tue: 45-60 minutes

Wed: rest

Thu: 45-60 minutes

Fri: rest one week, then 30-40 minutes the other week

After 8-12 weeks of a schedule like the one above, you will be well prepared for the rigors and demands of a structured marathon training program. You will find yourself able to sustain much higher heart rates during workouts and races months down the road. When the truly “hard” training days arrive in the fall as you get close to race day, you will find it easier to complete the workouts with your well-developed aerobic engine.

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