

The amount of time you spend on each training phase depends on a number of factors, including your experience, fitness, aspirations, strengths and weaknesses. There will also be a period where elements of phases overlap as the emphasis changes and the athlete makes the transition.

Base conditioning

Because base training comes before you actually begin a specific training plan, it can often be overlooked or be too brief. However this early phase is no less important than the other phases as it develops your cardiovascular efficiency, increases your endurance and strengthens your muscles, bones and connective tissues.

This eventually makes it possible for your body to safely handle the tougher training to come and therefore makes your training more effective. The key to building a successful base is adding just enough intensity to improve your fitness but not too much so that you overdo it and get ill, injured or de-motivated.

Developing strength

The main components involve a variety of hill training and a balance of core and general body conditioning. Hill training is uncomfortable and that's why runners either love it or hate it, but it's an extremely effective method of training. This is a staple ingredient in Kenyan athletes' training and it's what makes them extremely well conditioned. The additional stress of hill running places greater demands on your body and helps improve your leg strength and lactate threshold. Running both uphill and downhill forces you to run with a more efficient stride, which helps train and improve your running style and economy. There is simply no better workout than hill training for improving your overall running fitness.

Developing speed endurance

This is given a variety of names: tempo, threshold, lactic turn-point ... but whatever you call it, lactate threshold training is a vital part of your training plan. The running intensity is at a level where your body begins to produce more lactic acid than it can process. When we improve our lactate threshold, all of our race paces will improve and that's why lactate threshold training is one of the most valuable training sessions in your plan.

Developing speed and race practice

While you must continue to include speed endurance training in your plan, the addition of speed will improve your performance. A well thought-through mix of pace workouts will help improve your running form, condition your body to work effectively while coping with the discomfort of faster speed. Practise working at different race paces and develop kick finishes for the end of a race. However, speed work needs to be specific to each runner and the event they are training for and it requires a patient and realistic approach as the benefits will not be apparent immediately since it takes time for your body to adapt.

The taper and goal race

To run your very best you need to reach a peak, and, to achieve this, you need to ease back on your training load. You can only afford to do this before a few key races each year, which means learning to 'train through' some less important races. The difficulty is finding the perfect taper for you, as it is very different for each athlete. The ideal length of taper is from seven days to three weeks, but of course this depends on the distance of the event, how hard and how long you've been training. With a taper that's too short you can be tired on race day but tapering for too long can lead you to feeling sluggish and having doubts about your fitness. It's therefore important to find the right balance for you.

Rest and recovery

For most runners, when you have raced hard it takes about one day to recover for every mile you have raced. No, we didn't believe this either but for full recovery this is the case! This amount of time gives you a chance to recover both physically and mentally from the efforts of training and racing your event. It doesn't mean no running, but just that you should take it easy and give yourself a bit of a break. It can be too tempting, especially after a period of good training and having run well in your big race, to want to get straight back into training. You will be better served by enjoying some alternative exercise or easy cross-training before getting back into a training programme. This break helps you re-focus and consider your next challenge. You won't lose very much fitness and the break will allow your body to fully recover. You will return to your training regime more motivated than ever.