

## RACE YOUR WAY INTO SHAPE!

While out on a long, slow distance training run this past Saturday, my training partners asked me what might be the most important thing to do to improve running performance. My answer was simple: RACE OFTEN. I've always believed that you can race your way into shape just as other sports believe you can play your way into shape. It goes right along with SPORT SPECIFICITY, which states you must practice exactly what you're going to do in competition.

Why does racing help you become a better and faster runner? The 3 key reasons are as follows:

- **IT'S A GREAT WAY TO RAISE YOUR ANAEROBIC THRESHOLD (AT).** Running above your AT raises your AT. And just about any race will put you above your AT, with the exception of maybe a marathon (and I don't recommend using that as a training race anyway!). Of course, intervals of many kinds and tempo runs are great to raise the AT, but really there is no better speed workout than racing. Due to the motivation, you really push harder for longer than you would if you were doing a workout. If you run a 5K "all out" (meaning you run the prescribed distance as fast as you can), this would be 105% of your AT. If you run a 10K all out, this would be at 100% of your AT. Most likely, you will spend time above your AT at longer distances too. For example, the final 3 miles of a ½ marathon will most likely be above your AT.
- **IT HELPS YOU UNDERSTAND HOW TO PACE.** By racing often, you get a sense of the difference between a 5K, 10K, 15K, ½ marathon and marathon. Racing often really helps you fine tune this feel. So many runners get to their goal race and struggle with pacing because they haven't practiced enough in practice races. I see it, as I'm sure you do, often. I'll line up at a ½ marathon and watch many people shoot out of the hole like it's a 5K, only to see them already huffing and puffing by mile 1. This really is all about experience. You can't practice this without taking some lumps in racing, and the more you do it, the more you'll have a feel for it. And the racing helps you adjust your pace for other races. I use races to adjust the paces of the people I coach. For example, by looking objectively at your 5K time, you should be able to determine what pace you can hold for a 10K. And by looking at that time, you should be able to predict what you can run for a race of longer distance. It's a great start anyway, and they also have charts on the internet that you can use to plug in your actual time at one distance and predict your time at another distance. From what I've seen, it is pretty accurate. Racing often is also a great way to constantly change your interval times at the track (which also makes you faster). I see many people at the track running their repeats either too fast or too slow. The intervals should be based on your race times. And if you don't race enough, you'll be using unreliable interval times, because they'll be "out of date".
- **FINALLY, IT BUILDS CONFIDENCE:** I know this works great for me. For example, when I ran the Micanopy ½ last week, I hit my goal time. And hitting this goal time tells me what I SHOULD be able to hit for my marathon in December. So this was a huge boost. If I can hold 7:20's for 13.1, I SHOULD be able to hold 8's for 26.2, which is my goal. I know as well as anybody that much goes into the marathon, so I know things can happen, but it is still a confidence boost to see it objectively on paper, so I can go in feeling good about it. What if I didn't do a ½ before the full? Would I have that confidence, or would I be unsure? Of course I would be unsure. I've seen this with my

trainees and friends as well. As soon as someone I coach saw that she can hold under 6:40's for the ½, she knew darn well she could go sub 7's for the 30K in November, but she needed to see this in her performance to have the confidence. Success breeds success. If you want success, you must commit to racing more!!

Can you race too much? Yes. You can get burned out physically and mentally. The key is to find the balance. Some people like to race every weekend. I think that works well if they are specializing in 5Ks and 10Ks. I don't think this works well for the marathon for obvious reasons. But if you are training for the marathon, I really like the format of racing every other weekend, and doing a long run on the weekends in between. This works very well. You'll know if you are racing too much by if you feel like you are getting overtrained mentally or physically. I think, at the very least, you should try to race once per month, and if you're doing a long race (30K or marathon), let the distances build as you go. But I believe if you're really serious about hitting your racing goals, then you should race every other week. To me, it's the easiest way to get a big bang for your buck!