

HOW TO RUN TRACK

By Rob Maxwell, M.A.

When you ask a runner or a coach how to get fast, the very quick answer is SPEED WORK—or TRACK. If push came to shove, I'd have to give that answer myself, but the key is—you have to do it right!

One of the first “laws” we learn in exercise physiology is the rule of specificity. That means that the greater you **match** what you're doing in training to the event you'll be performing in, the greater the effect will be. In short, to run faster, you must run. But this can be, and needs to be, taken even further. To run faster for longer distances (i.e. endurance running), you must train that way as well. Both endurance runners and sprinters use the track (i.e. intervals) to get faster. The key is to make sure you're doing what you need to be doing to get the benefits. Your training needs to closely match your racing. In short, a sprinter needs to run very fast, short repeats with long recovery because that is the type of race he/she will run. An endurance athlete needs to run fast (but not all-out) intervals with very little recovery because that is the type of racing he/she does. Yes, there is a time and place for endurance runners to run track to work on their “kick” at the end of a race, but that's not what I'm talking about. I'm talking about the week-in and week-out track workouts we runners do to improve our 5K, etc.

An effective track workout for endurance athletes will raise the anaerobic threshold (AT). This is what cruising speed is all about. To get faster, you must boost your AT. This happens by doing repeats at or just above your AT with very little recovery. If you run your repeats as fast as you can and then take complete rest, this is doing very little to improve your aerobic fitness and is essentially doing the same thing as a maximum set on the leg press. It will improve your all-out speed (for 100 meters or so), but nothing for your 5K. **The best pace to run for your track workouts to improve your 5K is at your current 5K pace.** Again, you must spend time above your AT (your 5K pace is that), but because it's broken up (intervals), you're not going too far above your AT. The distance of repeats done isn't as important as the pace, but you can do ¼ mile all the way up to 1 mile repeats (occasionally even longer). Conventional wisdom states that the longer the race you're training for, the longer your repeats should be, but again, I don't think that's as important as the proper pace and the proper rest interval. Along with pace, what differentiates an endurance track workout from a sprinter's track workout is the length of the recovery. An endurance runner's interval recovery needs to be short! When training for endurance, you do NOT want to be completely recovered during the rest interval—only partially recovered. This is what forces your AT system to improve. The recovery interval needs to be, at the most, ½ of the work interval. When you really want to push the envelope, rather than increase your speed, cut the recovery even more. So, for effective ¼ mile repeats, that would mean that you would rest no more than 200 meters, and when you really want to push it, 100 meter recoveries. Don't stop or walk during this recovery either, because again, with the law of specificity, we want to match what we'll be doing in racing. Yes, cutting the recovery is work, but if you're running the right pace, this will not be too tough. It will simply be just right. Running right at your current 5K pace will ensure that you're not overtraining, and if you're not

able to do this workout, you have either miscalculated your 5K pace or simply ignored and ran them too hard.

How many repeats are best? I believe in no more than 3 miles of speed work. A good rule of thumb is no more than 10% of your weekly volume. That's not a bad rule. So if you're running 30 miles per week, that would be 3 miles worth (12 ¼'s or 6 ½'s or 3 1 miles). You need to use common sense on that one, but I see no need for more than 3 miles. Our group usually does 2-3 miles worth and we vary it. I can't state enough how important it is to worry more about your pace and your rest interval than the other parts of the speed equation.

Race at your races, not at track. It's very easy to get caught up in viewing track as competition. DON'T!. Beating your partner at track means nothing! If your buddy runs faster than you in 5Ks, you have no business running your intervals up with him or her or in front of him or her. This doesn't mean that you won't eventually catch that person. All it means is that you're likely overtraining. I tell people in my track group that they have a choice to make out of 2 options: They either run their repeats at a certain speed or they better race faster! A proper speed workout should feel like a really good workout—not kill you. Take your hardest effort to the 5K course.

Another note on pace: When you go to a 5K, chances are you're rested, it's early in the morning, and you're ready (motivated) to race—maybe even wearing lighter shoes. Typically, those are not the factors when you go to your speed workout. So just running your AT 5K pace will feel harder than it would on race morning, so running ABOVE it would really over train you. The best way to get everything out of your track workouts is to simply show up once a week and get in your work. As your races get faster, make your paces at track match that, but just keep showing up and keep the consistency going. Don't be a weekend warrior. Don't be the guy that shows up every so often and turns the workout into a race. You'll get the most out of your speed workout by sticking to your guns (pace) and doing it week in and week out.