Speed Work – Why?

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What's your distance – 5k, 10k, half marathon, full marathon or ultra-marathon? Well, it doesn't actually matter what the distance you're aiming for is, but mixing up your run pace and introducing some serious speed work, will improve your overall running performance considerably.

For some runners, 'speed' is a rude word not to be used or they think as they're training to increase their distance they need miles under their belt not sprints. This is down to a lack of understanding as to why runners should be including it in their training. Nobody has taught them what to do, so their training consists of simply lacing up the trainers and heading out of the door for yet another one-paced effort. Of course, that certainly has a role to play in any training programme – it's fun, refreshing, good for general aerobic fitness and, for a while, it can even result in improvement. For instance, if you've been off for a while or have just started, easy miles in the bank will be just what the doctor ordered. But keeping everything at the same speed will quickly see any improvement plateau, before declining to a dead-end.

The key is not to think that speed involves emulating Usain Bolt, but rather running at a different pace to your usual run. In actual fact, a good proportion of a speed session will actually mean running slower than normal – as long as you include the faster bits as well. So what we're talking about here is alternating fast and slow efforts.   To get the most out of a speed session, you need to evaluate your own running and create workouts accordingly. The examples that follow will cover that, but remember: speed can take on a whole host of different guises. A new athlete aiming to run no more than a few miles might regard 8 x 200m with 90secs rest as a tough endurance session; an Ultra runner might be looking at 10 miles very slow followed by 10 miles at race pace to create a similar effect.

When and Where

Where is simple: anywhere! You don't need exact distances, nor do you need special venues. Ten x 400m on the track is a perfectly acceptable workout for an Olympic-distance event. But then so is 10 x 75secs on the road or 10 x 68secs in the park. All will provide the same physiological response.

The most important thing to consider is how often you should include speed work. If you were simply running and not doing any other sports, then two speed efforts a week would work perfectly. But given the time needed for recovery, as well as the other two disciplines and life in general, a rough rule to work to would be one workout every six running sessions. So that might mean you throttle down and change pace every 10 days or so.

What does it all mean?

Intervals

A set recovery period between efforts. Decrease the recovery for endurance; increase it for speed. For example, 10 x 400m with 30secs rest is good for endurance; 10 x 400m with 4mins rest will be much quicker.

Tempo

Around three miles is the best distance for runs at this speed (about 85%). A good rule is to be able to finish and say, "I could run 10 miles at the same speed if I had to!"

Fartlek

Running slow then fast for a number of repitions either for a set distance (between lamp posts or similar), or if being coached then on the whistle blast alternate slow and fast runs.

Pyramid

The session increases either distance or time for a set period. E.g. 1,2,3,4,5,5,4,3,2,1 min fast paced runs with 1 min recovery in between. Or using distance: 100, 200, 300, 400, 400, 300, 200,100 metre fast paced runs with 1 min recovery in between.

The Sessions

Build Speed

This is an important element to consider. You may not be training to be a sprinter, but developing a sprinter's style, and the muscles employed, will help you train better in the workouts that are more beneficial for you. Remember to stay relaxed in all of these workouts; fast sprinting is about relaxed power.

1. Increasing distance sprints: 80m, 90m, 100m, 110m, 120m, 130m, 140m, 150m, 160m, 170m, 180m, 190m, 200m (or 6,8,10,12,14,16,18, 20, 22, 24, 26, 28, 30secs). Walk back to start line for recovery.
2. Easy run of about 5 miles followed by 6 x 100m (6 x 15secs). 1 min walk recovery between each.
3. 9 x 200m (9 x 30sec) running easy for 1 and 2 then hard for 3. Easy for 4 and 5, hard for 6. Easy for 7 & 8 then hard for 9. Your efforts for each 80%, 80% and 95% of max respectively. Walk recovery between each effort - 4 mins.
4. 9 x 100m (9 x 15sec) running the first 3 hard for 30m then back off for 30m then accelerate to the line. Next 3 easy for 30m, hard for 30m, then easy to the line. Last 3 – easy for 30m, hard (85%) 30m, max to the finish. 2 mins walk recovery between each set of 3.
5. 6 x 150m (25secs) with 3 min recovery, running at 90%

Build Power

These core workouts will develop speed endurance allowing you to maintain a high speed for much longer.

1. Fartlek always results in great improvements. For those who haven't used them, they're unstructured sessions. For example, on a 7 mile run. Warm up for a few miles then run hard for a minute before jogging until you see a post box, then run hard until the next lamp post, then jog until you pass a walker and so on. Or to be more structured include 6 x 30secs, 4 x 1min and 1 x 5 mins with recovery jogs in between.
2. The standard 10x 400m is a very good session. As your fitness improves change the recoveries. For example, start off with 1 min recoveries for all 10, then as you progress change to 1min the first, then 30secs after that. Then 90secs for the first, then 45 secs and so on, just to mix it up a bit.
3. 5 x 1k with 90secs rest. Run the efforts at 5k race pace.
4. 15 x 300m with 90sec rest in between.
5. 12 laps of 400m or run 3 miles. During either run, alternate hard 100m (90%) with easy 100m (80%). When fit, it's possible to run close to your 3 mile best doing this.
6. 1 x 600m (2 mins); 2 x 500m (1:40mins); 3 x 400m (75 secs); 4 x 300m (1min); 5 x 200m (30secs). As a recovery jog the same distance as you ran for each effort.
7. 3 sets of 10 x 200m (or 30secs) with 30 secs recovery; 3 mins recovery between sets

8. 3 sets of 4 x 300m (or 45 secs) with 45 secs recovery; 3 mins recovery between sets.
9. Pyramid: 1 x 400m (70 secs); 1 x 600m (2mins); 1 x 800m (2.30mins); 1x 1000m (3.15mins). Jog 200m and then back down again. For example, 800m, 600m, 400m etc.
10. 3-mile tempo (about 2 to 3 mins slower than your race speed), followed by 4-6 x 1 min hard with 90 sec rest. This is how race athletes feel – running hard for a sustained period before picking it up for the final 1 to 2 miles.

Build Endurance

Learn to maintain a high speed in these workouts and running at long-distance race pace will become easier.

1. 3 – 5 x 1 mile runs with 1 min rest in between. Think about running 10min mile pace for each mile.
2. Easy Out, hard back: Run out for up to 10 miles at about 2 mins per mile slower than usual, turn around and run back as hard as you can.
3. In a 10 mile run include 2 x 10min efforts, aiming to run the second effort quicker than the first. 5 mins rest after each effort.
4. In a 10 mile run, go easy for 3 miles, steady for 3 miles then race pace for the final 3. Cool down for 1 mile.
5. 3 x 1mile with 2 mins rest, then 1 x 800m as hard as you can.
6. 5 x 2k with 2 mins rest; each 2k must be 10 secs faster than the last so choose the speed of your first rep wisely!
7. Run 3 miles hard, then 4 x 1min with 1 min rest sprints, then another 3 miles hard.
8. Warm up, then 2 x 3 miles, running the 2nd 3 miles 15 secs faster than the 1st; 4 mins recovery.
9. 5 miles in the morning; 5 miles in the evening.
10. 25 x 400m (70 secs) with 100m jog recovery (45 secs)

Build Strength

Hills are a great 'natural' strengthener, as well as helping you to concentrate more on your running form.

1. Short & sharp and not too steep hill reps – 8 x 150m with a walk recovery the day after a long run. A great way to remind your body how to run fast without stressing it.
2. 8 x 1k up a shallow incline; jog down to recover
3. Run fast on the flat for about 15 secs, then accelerate up a steep hill for 10 secs, walk recovery. Repeat 8 times.
4. On an 8-10 mile run, accelerate to a sprint up every hill.
5. 4 x long hills (about 600m); walk recovery. Aim for a fast hard pace.