

## Train Slower, Race Faster



Slow down! Doing so may actually help you run faster.

Last year I went for a run with **Adam** and Kara Goucher around the **Nike** campus in Beaverton, Ore. Not only was I thrilled to have the opportunity to run with such great athletes, but I was also very pleased to be able to keep up with them. It wasn't even hard, because they didn't run terribly fast. When I asked Kara if she normally ran so slowly in her easier sessions she told me that she did.

Scott Douglas had a similar experience in Kenya. The *Running Times* editor travelled there expecting to have his butt handed to him in his attempts to keep up with the world's best runners but was surprised to discover that the world's best runners dawdle in their designated easy runs.

Studies on the training intensity distribution of elite runners have found that most elite runners run at low intensities most of the time. For example, a survey of male and female runners who competed in the 2004 U.S. Olympic Team Trials Men's and Women's Marathons revealed that the men did almost three-quarters of their training slower than their marathon

race pace, while women did more than two-thirds of their training at slower paces.

Why do the fastest runners do most of their running at slow speeds? Because they run a lot, and if they ran a lot and did most of their running at high intensities they would quickly burn out. But you can also turn this answer upside down and say that elite runners run slowly most of the time *so that* they can run a lot. Research has shown that average weekly running mileage is the best training predictor of racing performance in runners. The more we run, the faster we race. Keeping the pace slow most of the time enables runners to run more without burning out.

## **Too Hard, Too Often**

The training intensity distribution of the typical age-group runner is very different from that of the average professional. This was demonstrated a number of years ago when researchers at Arizona State University asked a group of 30 female runners to describe their training. According to these self-reports, the women did three easy runs, one moderate-intensity run, and 1.5 high-intensity runs per week. But data collected from heart-rate monitors that the researchers gave to the women to wear through one full week of training told a different story. In reality the women did less than half of their training in the low-intensity range, almost half in the moderate-intensity range, and less than 9 percent in the high-intensity range.

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Why do age-group runners do so much less easy running than elite runners? I think it's mainly because age-groupers run a lot less, so they naturally push the pace a bit in most of their runs to make them "count" more. The problem with this approach is that running at a moderately high intensity (near the lactate threshold) is exponentially more taxing on the sympathetic nervous system than running slower. Therefore runners who run at this intensity day after day develop a burden of fatigue that they carry throughout the training process and that prevents them from getting as much out of their running as they would if they ran the same amount but slowed down most of the time.

One study involving Spanish runners found that those who did 80 percent of their training below the lactate threshold, 10 percent at LT, and 10 percent above LT improved their race times significantly more in five months than runners who did the same amount of running but performed only 70 percent of it below LT, 20 percent at LT, and 10 percent above LT.

The training intensity distribution of the more successful runners in this study—80 percent low, 10 percent moderate, and 10 percent high—is believed to be optimal for most runners. Call it the 80/10/10 rule, and compare it to the 45/45/10 training intensity distribution of the women in the ASU study, which represents the norm for age-group runners. Correcting this imbalance is one of the simplest and most effective ways that the typical age-group runner can improve his or her running. So how is it done?

### **Solution #1: Heart Rate Monitoring**

When I tell groups of runners that most of them run too hard, too often, I get a lot of funny looks. Most runners assume they probably don't train hard enough. I suppose this is true in the sense that most runners should run more mileage and make their hardest workouts harder, but these things would be a lot easier to embrace if runners first slowed down in 80 percent of their runs.

The problem is that most runners don't know what it means to run easy. Training by heart rate can fix that. Using a heart-rate monitor in workouts allows runners to see objectively whether their intensity level is actually easy, moderate, or hard. Once you've determined the proper heart rate training zones for your fitness level, it's no longer possible to fool yourself into thinking you're taking it easy when you really aren't.

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Recent technologies based on heart rate training offer the promise of a new solution to the problem of running too hard, too often. Last year I started working with **PEAR Sports**, a company that makes one such device, called the Square One. It essentially combines coaching with heart rate monitoring to give athletes the best of both worlds. As you do your workouts you listen through headphones to a coach who guides you through heart rate-based training sessions. Effective training becomes as easy as pressing one button and doing as you're told.

So why doesn't every runner train with a heart-rate monitor all the time? Surveys suggest that many athletes find heart rate monitors difficult to use and find the theory behind heart rate-based training difficult to master. It seems to require the knowledge of a coach to correctly prescribe customized heart rate-training zones, create a sensible heart rate-based training plan, and execute each workout correctly.

### **Solution #2: Hiring A Coach**

Piggybacking off the last point, a good coach can make adherence to the 80/10/10 rule a no-brainer. Your coach determines the proper training zones for you, creates a sensible training plan for your exclusive use, and makes sure that you execute each workout correctly.

Except that most coaches aren't actually present with their runners through every workout to ensure proper execution, so there's a high level of personal accountability and self discipline involved when working with a coach, particularly if the relationship is mainly virtual. Keep in mind the coach-athlete relationship is like any relationship: it might work, it might not. If you don't have good chemistry with the coaches in your immediate area, you're out of luck.

Like anything, heart rate training or hiring a coach probably isn't for everyone, but I believe that the right type of guidance can help greater numbers of runners heed the 80/10/10 rule and reap the rewards of slowing down. In the meantime, what's most important is simply to recognize that you probably are running too hard, too often and choose the best solution for you.