



Follow the Greatest

Haile Gebrselassie in a recent Runnersworld article states, “The most important thing is to set a goal for yourself because then you have a plan.”

These are words which have clearly paid off for the master, given his awesome 2.04 marathon world record. (Incidentally, that’s four and a bit 10ks back-to-back in around 29.30 each. And only 13 people ran faster than that for 10k in Britain last year!)

Here are three benefits a goal will bring:

- give you a **focal point** for your training and racing effort
- **motivate** you to persevere over a longer-term
- help **shape your training** along the way

The first two benefits speak for themselves, but the third is really where Geb’s statement comes to life.

Set the goal

Firstly you’ve got to establish your goal and for most people this will be quite broad. “I aim to get fit,” for example.

That’s fine, but it will help in the long run if the statement is more specific. Try to put some definition around “get fit.”

An example may be, “run next year’s Southend 10k in under an hour.”

The rule is, *the more specific your goal, the more specific your training can be, and therefore the more likely you are to succeed.*

(If you’ve heard of the SMART rules of goal setting used in business, these apply equally here! “Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic, Time-based”)

Have a plan

So you have your goal, and already you can see potential benefits in terms of **focus** and **motivation**.

Channelling this energy effectively is why planning is important. A plan will provide clarity around the nature and regularity of your training sessions. In addition a plan will:

- give you confidence that your training is aligned to your goal
- allow flexibility to adjust your training in response to injury, time pressure or fatigue
- provide you with interim milestones
- allow you to track and demonstrate progress
- give you confidence in races that you have done the right work (even when you’re standing on the start line with jelly-legs!)
- allow you to accurately predict performance in training and racing
- keep your racing aspirations realistic
- educate you on what your body responds best to
- give you access to a broader range of sessions to accomplish your goal
- allow you to drive variety into your training (which was the second big tip Haile gave in his article)



Build the plan

An effective plan should touch on all the key components which make up running performance.

The following table shows typical components to consider, a simplified definition of each component and suggestions on the types of training sessions which would bring about improvement on each component:

Performance component	Practical definition	Type of training
Stamina	Basic cardio-vascular fitness - the ability to keep going at a moderate rate.	“Time on legs” or what is sometimes called LSD (long slow distance). Long duration, low intensity work. Could be x-training, providing it impacts the same muscle groups as running (ie: predominantly quads, hamstrings, glutes and calves) Longer interval work
Speed Endurance	Running fast for extended periods. How your body copes at fast paces.	“Lactate threshold” training – tempo running Interval training Fartlek training Racing
Basic Speed	Speed over short distances - essentially as fast as you can run.	Sprint sessions: short intervals of up to 100m, with long recoveries. Sprint “form” and technique work Plyometrics, such as bounding Explosive power, such as shuttle sessions, very short hills, wearing weight vests, etc...
Strength	“Gym strength” ie: how much weight can you lift/press/pull, etc...	Weight training (esp. high weight, low reps) Yoga, Tai Chi, etc... Any static state strength work such as Gymnastics Core stability exercises
Strength Endurance	Your ability to “hold it together” over distance. Maintaining form, coping with hills.	Hill running, particularly longer hills Any heavy resistance work, such as beach running, or running through mud (try the Stebbing X-C!) Circuit training Weight training (high reps/low weights) Flotation vest work (wet vesting) in the pool
Flexibility	Can you touch your toes (!), etc... improving your range of motion.	Regular stretching Some forms of x-training Massage Day to day posture
Diet	In running terms, foods that provide fuel and essential minerals for exercise and materials to repair and rebuild muscle.	Consider – The right sort of additional fuels. - water intake during/between training Basic rules: complex carbohydrate before training/simple carbohydrate during and immediately after/complex carbohydrate and protein to refuel and rebuild.
Recovery	Building adequate rest into a programme to ensure you are able to complete the programme to the required level.	Sleep!!! Very easy runs/x-training as a recovery session Gentle jogging to ease post-race stiffness/ encourage blood-flow and repair. Variety in your training – recovery is mental as well as physical



The next step is to examine your goal in more detail and select the balance of training components you would need meet that goal.

The components can be grouped as follows:

1) Stamina, Speed Endurance:

The balance of the miles you run will be split between these two categories, reflecting the two energy systems for muscular performance: aerobic and anaerobic.

In basic terms, the aerobic system simply means that oxygen is used to break down food into energy. The anaerobic system produces energy in the absence of oxygen.

When you run at moderate effort levels, the blood and cardiovascular system is able to supply sufficient oxygen for aerobic energy production. But as you increase effort past the point of your muscles' maximal oxygen uptake (called your VO2max) your muscles enter oxygen debt. By this point your anaerobic system will be producing most of your energy requirement. As you work harder the blood is increasingly flooded with lactate. An efficient athlete is able to recycle this lactate and continue to perform. But everyone will eventually reach a level of exertion where the body cannot cope with the levels of blood lactate and your muscles become acidic and can no longer contract at the same rate. (This is known as your lactate threshold, which is expressed as a % of your VO2max). Fitter athletes have a higher lactate threshold so they can run faster for longer.

Tempo runs are runs of 20-40mins at the level of effort just below your lactate threshold. The idea is that regularly doing this will cause that threshold to rise. The body responds by building more efficient muscle tissue, better able to cope with the higher levels of exertion.

Similarly, interval sessions can take you over the lactate threshold on each repetition. These sessions can also teach you how to deal with the declining muscular performance by improving your running economy, ie: how well you translate energy production into forward motion.

Stamina training will improve your basic fitness, your aerobic system.

Speed endurance training will be better at boosting your anaerobic system

Therefore, your plan could aim to split the balance of your mileage between the two types of session according to your goal.

Each distance running event involves elements of both aerobic and anaerobic energy production. As you would expect, over shorter distance events, the anaerobic system plays a greater role, as your muscles are performing at a higher intensity. From reading running studies, the aerobic/anaerobic split for classic distances could be estimated as follows:

Race distance	5k	10k	10Miles	HM	Marathon
% aerobic	80%	90%	92%	95%	98%
% anaerobic	20%	10%	8%	5%	2%

If we apply this to our plan and the goal is, say, to run a pb for 10k, then 10% of all mileage we ran should in theory be anaerobic, or **speed endurance** work such as tempo runs and intervals.



If we are targeting the Marathon, then we need only cover 2% of all miles as speed endurance. This obviously reflects the lower intensity, more **stamina**-based approach required for a successful Marathon.

2) Basic Speed, Strength and Strength Endurance:

These components are key enablers in supporting the basic running elements of the plan.

Basic speed training is important for distance runners for a number of reasons:

- It promotes a more efficient, economical running action
- If you develop good basic speed, the pace required for a distance event would in theory seem easier
- It provides you with a “kick” finish for those important last few metres of a race
- Lack of basic speed can obviously be a limiting factor in effective speed endurance training

Strength training is important because it increases muscle capacity and improves resistance and stability in muscles, tendons, and connective tissues: all of which is vital for preparing muscles to face the trauma of a long endurance schedule, and for avoiding injury.

Strength endurance training is a much underrated component of the plan. It helps to build resilience and enables the body to maintain structural integrity, core stability and form over long sessions, races, or schedules.

Below are some suggestions as to the relative importance of incorporating these types of sessions into your plan, according to your target race distance:

Race distance	5k	10k	10Miles	HM	Marathon
Basic Speed	✓✓✓	✓✓	✓✓	✓	✓
Strength	✓✓	✓✓	✓	✓	✓
Strength Endurance	✓	✓	✓✓	✓✓	✓✓✓

This chart is only indicative according to the distance.

Each individual will be strong or weak in these areas, so adding these sessions to your plan should be more based on your own requirements. If you lack basic speed, add a sprint drills session once a fortnight, for instance.

3) Recovery, Diet, Flexibility

Recovery is crucial to allow the body the chance to rebuild after the trauma of a training session. But recovery is not just about resting – it is about encouraging this regeneration process - what is sometimes called “active rest.” This involves exercising, but at very low intensities, ie: easy enough not to create more trauma, but sufficient to encourage blood flow. This helps to bring vital repair nutrients to the damaged muscles.

Diet is obviously important and there is a huge amount of information available on the subject through running publications.

Flexibility is believed to be key to avoiding injury and there are tips on this elsewhere on this site. Greater flexibility gives a wider range of motion for muscles, ensuring they are not operating at the limit of flexibility during exercise. This is where strains can occur.

You should try to ensure these elements are actually factored into your plan so you do manage to fit them in. They should compliment the core running and enabling



components of the plan. In other words, add rest days to the plan and have a regular stretching routine. You could possibly even consider meal choices to fit around sessions (more protein on a strength day, more carbs on a stamina day, etc...)

Peaking, Tapering, Phasing and Cycles

By this point you should have established a goal, worked out your optimum balance of training components and thought about how much time you have to train.

Next you need to build progression into your plan. How long will the plan last? Is your goal a single race at some point in the future, or is to prepare for a season of races? Or perhaps it is more general still?

Peaking and Phasing

If you are looking to reach a **peak in performance** at a point in the future, perhaps targeting a specific race, then a phased approach to training is what you would traditionally adopt. This would involve dividing the plan into phases of time and concentrating on different components within each phase.

Typically for a distance runner this would be:

Phase 1 – Endurance – *predominantly higher mileage, long runs, longer reps, strength work.*

Phase 2 – Speed Endurance – *switch in focus to more quality speed endurance sessions. Switch also from strength to strength endurance*

Phase 3 – Speed/refining race fitness – *specific sessions to reach a peak. Perhaps some preparatory races, little heavy strength work and more recovery from the higher earlier mileage of phase 1*

Phase 1 would form the bulk of the time in the plan, with Phase 3 just occupying a few weeks. A suggested split would be:

Phase 1 – 60% of time, Phase 2 – 30% of time, Phase 3 – 10% of time.

Tapering

The objective of tapering is to arrive at a target point carrying the maximum benefit of all the training with none of the exhaustion or tiredness.

In simple terms this just means resting for a day or two prior to the event and avoiding any heavily taxing sessions in the couple of weeks before this.

A good basic method of tapering would be:

- 1) Avoid hard sessions (those which leave you tired for a few days) in the 2 weeks before the target event.
- 2) In the last week just do steady running and gradually reduce the distance/time over the early part of the week
- 3) Rest for a day or two before the event, with the option of a gentle jog of a couple of miles max.
- 4) Ensure you are stretching more in the final week, as this also encourages recovery.

Cycles

An alternative to phasing your training would be to work in cycles. This would be a good choice if your overall running goal is quite general.

For instance, create a 3 week cycle as follows:



Week 1 – Endurance focus

Week 2 – Speed Endurance focus

Week 3 – Recovery week

The repeat this indefinitely, breaking it to taper for a key event.

But always ensure your cycles build progression – have a regular course and try to run faster each cycle, or add an extra rep to your usual interval session each cycle.

This would ensure that each cycle moves you on from the last and you don't hit a rut and stagnate without improvement.

Track your progress

Keep a running diary - this will demonstrate progression and builds confidence. You'd be surprised how few serious runners keep a diary.

In the amazing 41 days in 1979 when Seb Coe set three world records, he ran what was his “benchmarking” session in the middle of it all – 6x300m with 45secs recovery. The times he posted that day told him immediately that he was in shape to run a world record.

Why not have a benchmark session or running route to test your progress every few weeks? Use the results to refocus the components of your plan for the next cycle.

Summary steps to creating your plan.

Step 1 – Establish your goal

Step 2 – Work out how much time and how many miles you realistically have time to run per week

Step 3 – Look at your goal in detail and work out your optimum balance between stamina miles and speed endurance miles

Step 4 – Look up suggested stamina and speed endurance sessions and incorporate them into your plan according to your optimum balance

Step 5 – Consider supporting components Speed, Strength, Strength Endurance. Add in sessions where possible to address your weaknesses in these areas

Step 6 – Look at the plan holistically and add in recovery sessions. Try not to run more than 2 hard weeks back to back. Some athletes prefer one week hard/one week easy. Be realistic about what you can achieve.

Step 7 – Consider a stretching routine, or reserve time within existing sessions to work on flexibility.

Step 8 – Work out the length of the plan and decide whether to arrange your sessions in cycles or phases. Either way, make sure there is progression in your plan

Step 9 – Track your progress!

Avoid common pitfalls

- Be prepared for disruption (through time pressure/injuries, etc...) - prepare for this by identifying and ring fencing the key sessions. If you are pushed, just do these. With your goal in mind, ask yourself, "If I could only do one session this week, what would it be?" For marathon it would be the long run, but for 10k it may be the 6x3min rep session, or for half marathon it may be the 40min tempo run, etc...