



Previously: Strength and mobility

This one: Training sessions

Next: Running technique

In #2, I encouraged you to think beyond 'training' and take a wider view of preparation, and outlined some principles that might sit behind the 'training' part of your approach (e.g. recovery, gradual build-up, adjusting as necessary). And #3 looked at non-running elements (especially strength and mobility work to help you build your running with a lower chance of injury). But of course the preparation will involve a bit of running, so here's something on that. What does a 'training session' involve? What different types might you include? And how could you define them without getting tangled up in the detail?

The intention is to clarify, but to do that, I have to slightly complicate things. There's a fair bit of jargon thrown around when describing training sessions, especially their structure, intensity and purpose. So I'll try to explore that, as well as providing a simple framework for gauging how hard you push yourself at any point.

As long as it doesn't injure you then any type of run will probably do *something* to make you fitter, even if it's not quite as optimal or time-efficient as it could be. So 'just running' is fine, up to a point, although it's not the most efficient way of getting fitter. To do that, mix it up.

Warm up, work, cool down

There are a huge range of possible sessions, and to some degree each is unique – even if it's the same on paper, you're doing it on a new day, with a body that may feel different, maybe in different conditions. But a basic structure might apply each time:

- Warm up
- Work
- Cool down

Don't go out of the door, straight to max effort, and run until you drop. Try to always include a gentle start and return to 'normal' at the finish. There are both physiological

and mental reasons for this, but to keep it simple, it means you're easing your body and your mind into the session and back out again into the remainder of your day.¹

Should I stretch?

There's varying advice about whether and when to stretch, and what stretching to do. Very little is 'proven', but the following sequence is a sensible approach:

- Easy warm up, walking or jogging (loosening muscles, raising the heart rate)
- Dynamic stretches (to mobilise what needs to be mobilised for running - this could involve some technical drills)
- Main session
- Cool down (lower heartrate, flush out waste products)
- Static stretches (restoring muscles to how they were pre-session)

Of course people run without stretching all the time, and when we evolved to run away from animals on the African plains, we didn't stop to stretch first. And because London training can be in cold weather, people often want to get moving rather than stop and stretch. So either they don't do any stretching at all, or they change the order and do a basic bit of mobilisation before heading outdoors.

Personally, I loosen whatever feels tight, and some basic stretching also helps my mind and muscles realise that I'm about to run. Five stretches that I find useful, which are reminders of the form I'd like to have, as much as a serious stretch:

- Hip flexors – to open up the hips after spending too much time sitting down
- Chest opening – to free my arms for a full range of movement
- Stretch calves + rotate ankles – so my feet feel responsive when I start to run
- Glutes – to wake up the stabilising muscles and make sure they'll contribute
- Standing stretch – fingers to the sky, to raise hips and shoulders and feel tall

Stretching is personal but mobility and elasticity are definitely good things to have, even if you lack pure 'flexibility'. Try different things and see what feels best for you, and if you don't do it before and/or after running, find time to include some stretching in your week - it really can help (especially if your days involve lots of sitting down).

¹ You may meet runners who say 'I never warm up'. Others say 'I never stretch' or 'I never do strength work'. It's usually followed by '...and I'm OK'. Yes, some people may get through the process like that, but beware 'survivor bias' - typically you only hear from the ones who've been lucky, not from all those who've ended up with an injury they could have avoided. And even for those who managed to get through unscathed, there's always the question of 'how good *could* you have been?'.

Measuring effort

In terms of their actual running², people often agonise over splits and speeds, and some plans (and coaches, and technology brands) try to sound scientific, stating that sessions must happen at a precise pace. Beware of getting sucked down that route.

I could go on about this a lot, but essentially the various targets (typically heart rate or pace) are meant to correlate with a level of intensity, because that's what matters. The idea is that a certain rate (or pace) means you must be working at a certain level. But even if it really mattered to be at such a precise effort level (it doesn't), there are plenty of reasons why this is full of error. Unless you're running on an indoor track, the figures make no allowance for a changing surface, junctions, weather, inclines etc. There's no account taken of your running efficiency (and how that changes over time). As far as I'm concerned, if you want to run at a certain perceived effort level then just get to know your body and run at that level, don't rely on some fairly ropey error-filled calculations to tell you what to do.³

If nothing else, you can waste a lot of time and money trying to measuring things - just because you can produce a precise number doesn't mean it's useful or meaningful. I'll stop my rant there, with the headline that working with *perceived effort* is the 'gold standard'.⁴ If you use that then it's simple, you can hold it in your head, it adjusts for the terrain and the day, it's cheap, and you don't need to faff about with a watch.

² All this applies equally well if you're including some walking as well as running within your sessions. Walking can also cover a range of efforts, and a hard walk can be tougher in terms of effort and muscle damage than an easy run.

³ One other classic problem is that people look up 'training paces' (there are websites for this - for completeness rather than recommendation, here's an example <https://runsmartproject.com/calculator/>). They then get attached to aspirations rather than reality. They might have decided that they *must* run a 4 hour marathon a few months from now. And they dig out all the '4h00 training paces', and use those for their running. But it's entirely feasible that they are nowhere near that fitness level right now, so they do all their work one gear harder than they should, training different energy systems, and never doing what's appropriate for them.

⁴ That's a quote from the official UK coach for one of the main GPS brands. Even he says that pace is just a crude measure of what matters, the level of work you put in. Heartrate-based training is closer to measuring effort, but this also has problems.

Training zones

Perhaps the best way to do that is using a 1-10 scale, or to make things even simpler, use a few training 'zones'. For example, you could use four zones and think of them as different gears (or different colours) corresponding to different degrees of effort and breathing/speaking ability⁵:

- Red (9-10) – sprinting or strides. No more than a word or two.
- Yellow (7-8) – hard work, sustainable up to perhaps 30-40 mins. You could speak for a few words or a sentence or two, but no more.
- Green (5-6) – steady effort you could maintain for a long time, breathing through your nose rather than gasping for breath.
- Blue (4 and below) – easy coasting, low effort, chat as much as you want.

| %age | Perceived Effort | Zones |
|------|------------------|--------|
| 100 | 10 | Red |
| 90 | 9 | |
| 80 | 8 | Yellow |
| 70 | 7 | |
| 60 | 6 | Green |
| 50 | 5 | |
| 40 | 4 | Blue |
| 30 | 3 | |
| 20 | 2 | |
| 10 | 1 | |

Obviously there's a spread within each – hard yellow is tougher than the bottom end of yellow. But four or five zones is probably enough to work with. The point is to calibrate your effort in an understandable way, because then you're in control of the session, both before and during, without being a slave to a watch or a spreadsheet.

Where to spend your time

For marathon training, expect to spend most time and most miles in your equivalent of 'Green' (5-6 out of 10). I'll make that point again. Ideally, you'd probably spend more than half of your time running at a fairly easy effort level, whether that's for all of the session, or as part of a longer session which includes other zones. The 'Green' zone is where you'll run most of the marathon itself, so it makes sense to become as efficient and effective as you can at that level. Your body will get used to using the appropriate energy systems, and it's where you should have capacity to think about *how* you're running, without straining. Easy running will make running easier.

However, to run faster you also need to run faster – if you don't do any harder running then all you're doing is teaching your body how to run slowly, and you're always running at your maximum speed. So try all of the zones within your weekly mix, because they'll all help.

- Blue – warming up, recoveries, cooling down, working on running form
- Green – long easy runs, recovery runs, recoveries within intervals
- Yellow – interval efforts, or a faster finish to longer runs
- Red – speed intervals and strides

⁵ These are taken from the old Adidas miCoach system – which has now been dropped, but I 'borrowed' some visuals while it still existed.

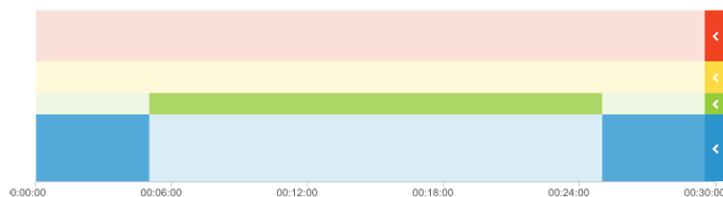
Types of session

You're really just looking to ensure there's some mix of long, easy, and hard running in your plan. I'll outline five basic types of session (two of which are similar). I've included visuals, using those 'zones' (so time runs along the bottom, and the colours show the zone for each part of that session).

Hopefully this also helps show how a limited number of zones can enable you to hold the session in your head (e.g. a 30 min session could be '5B - 20G - 5B').

1. Easy run

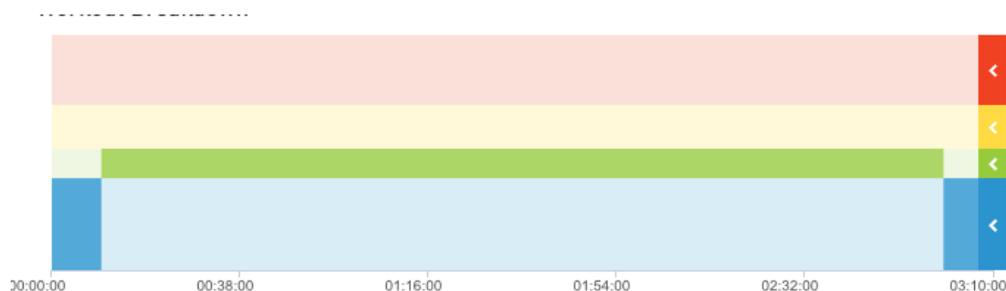
Not every session should be hard. A short, easy run is fine – it'll help you recover from harder days, it's a chance to think about your running technique, and it's an opportunity just to enjoy running and feel how your body is changing. 15-30 minutes, Blues and Greens, no pressure, relax.



2. Long run

This is considered to be particularly important for marathon training, so I'll talk about it in more detail another time. As the weeks pass, you'll build up the duration and therefore distance, but in the short term, think of it as being an easy, sustainable run. Some Blue, a lot of Green, the kind of effort where you could hold a conversation. It's good to do with someone else or in a group, because the need to talk will naturally stop you running too hard.

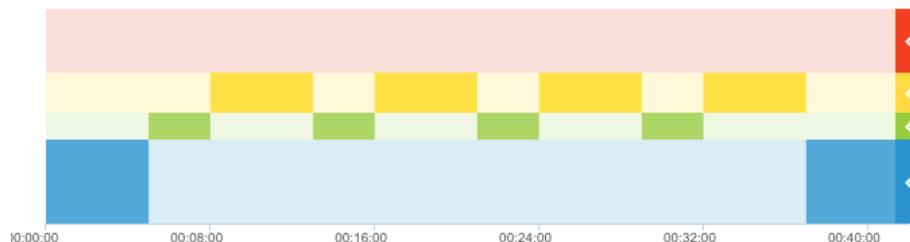
I'm not going to specify distances at this point, but ideally at about three months out from race day, perhaps you'd be working towards 90-120 mins. If you aren't there yet, that's fine, don't leap straight to it. But aim towards that, from where you are now. Feel free to include sections of walking – e.g. 10 mins run, 2 mins walk, repeated. The time will come for these runs to get longer, maybe adding 10-15 mins per week. But for now just start to see how they fit into your routine, and how you recover.



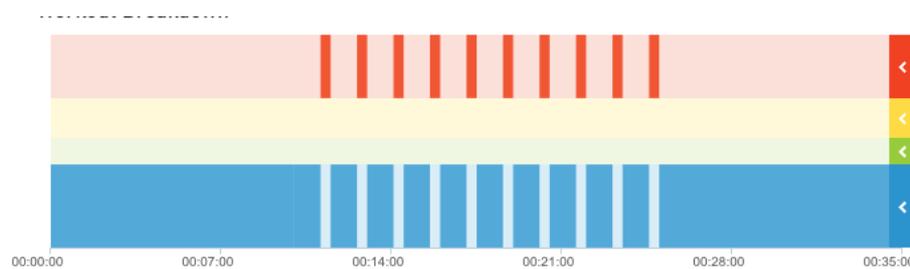
3. Intervals

Here, you'd mix up some faster running (Yellow or Red) with recoveries (Green or Blue). Again, include easy movement to warm up and cool down – don't launch straight into a hard effort, and don't stumble breathless through your door to finish.

Two examples here. The first would involve surging from Green to Yellow and then back again – so there's not a huge range of variation, and it'll feel like a continuous run with some harder sections.



The second example is more of a speed session, with short Red sections and easy Blue recoveries which could include walking or just a gentle jog. This would often be called 'strides' – you're striding out for a brief interval, although never at full sprint.



There are endless variations on interval sessions. For example, the intervals could be formed by hills – working harder on the way up, easier on the way down, although the pace doesn't really change.

Roughly speaking, you could work on the basis of a 30-45 minute session. 5 mins easy at the start and finish, of course, and within the remainder, around 5k of 'work' divided up (5 x 1k, 12 x 400m etc.) with recoveries in between.

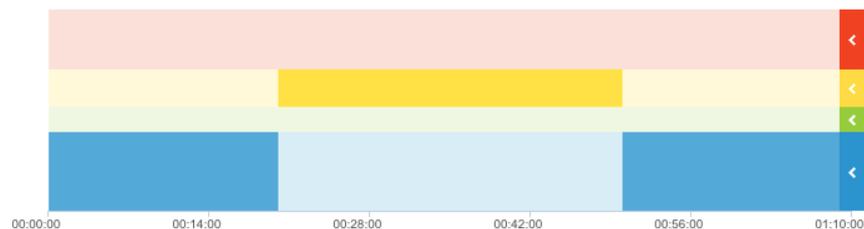
4. 'Tempo' run

This would consist of warming up and then a steady effort – maybe easy Yellow. Somewhere between 30-45 mins of work, so the total session is likely to be between 45-60 mins. Don't aim for exhaustion, but 'comfortable discomfort'. There's no reason to strain or to lose your running form, and the objective is not to finish on your knees.

5. 'Threshold' run

Similar to the previous one, so the graphic applies to both. But this would be a little harder, to the point where you feel fatigue building up, and the last part of the work

feels quite tough. Again, a steady effort but aim for mid-high Yellow. The purpose is to be running at or just below the 'threshold' where your body can't process the waste products from your muscles. After about 45 mins at that level, you'll have had enough. Maybe this would be a little longer than a 'Tempo' run - or include a section of this towards the end of a longer run. It'll help fitness, and it'll help you understand where that limit lies for you. When it comes to the marathon, you don't want to go anywhere near your 'red zone' until a long long way into the second half of the race.



A weekly diet?

These are just some examples, and attempts to show that running can take place at more than one effort level. Try to include a bit of everything through the course of the week, if a weekly routine works for you. I'm very cautious about appearing to set any kind of 'plan' when I don't know people's individual stories (so this is an illustration not a recommendation), but one approach could be a regular routine⁶ such as:

- Tuesday intervals
- Thursday tempo
- Saturday strides and some focus on technique
- Sunday long run
- And maybe one or two short recovery runs, if you feel they'd help

This is not a prescription – you might run more or less often, or on different days. Do what you can do, and what you enjoy doing. Substitute other activities wherever appropriate - e.g. a spinning class might equate to an interval session. The point is that variety is a good thing.

⁶ A regular weekly schedule is how most Kenyan running groups do it - <http://www.traininkenya.com/2016/10/08/wilson-kipsang-training/> But remember that they are free to structure their lives around running, and you may not have that luxury.

What to do, when?

In the past, marathon training has often been divided up into phases such as 'building the base', 'sharpening' and 'tapering'. That would mean spending time increasing the mileage, then trying to add speed, then recovering for the big day. That's fine, but it's not ideal for everyone. If you've already got the speed but don't have the endurance, then focus on endurance more than speed. But if you can already plod around but only have one gear, then there's nothing wrong with starting the process with the emphasis on intervals and tempo/threshold work, just to push the harder end of things a bit (and add in the endurance later on). If nothing else, those will be shorter sessions and perhaps a bit more feasible when it's cold and dark in Jan and Feb⁷.

In theory, this kind of 'periodisation' does matter, but don't get too hung up on it just as long as you're sticking to the basic principles of planning (see #2 - slow build-up, recovery, camels). If it's a dreadful day outside then it's going to be no pleasure grinding away slowly for mile after mile just because you're supposedly 'building your base'. Always give yourself permission to swap things around so that you're doing something suitable that day. Work on your strengths as well as your weaknesses. Remember to recover after a hard session. And do what you enjoy.

There's nothing wrong with just 'going for a run'. Sometimes that's a good way to shake off the day. But by deliberately including a range of sessions, you'll get more training benefit from the time and effort you put in. Throwing miles at the problem is not the most efficient or intelligent approach. Try to ensure you have the shape of the session in your head before you go, and aim to stick to it, more or less. And it's all easier if you use some simple training zones rather than get tangled up with meaningless 'precision'.

As usual, three points to finish:

- **Warming up and cooling down are important, whatever the session**
- **Find a simple system for structuring a session, ideally based on perceived effort**
- **Mix up the types of session you do, in order to be smart and efficient with your training time**

⁷ A good blog about 'inverting the pyramid' - working on speed early, rather than late: <https://www.theendurancestore.com/blogs/the-endurance-store/54873923-the-egyptians-might-have-been-faster-if-theyd-reversed-the-pyramid>