

Training Matters - Interval Training

What the hell do we get up to on a Wednesday evening? All that stopping and starting with rests in between? What's the point of that? What can it do for me? What is interval training?

Read on and we'll try to answer these questions.

On unstructured running, "just going out for a run" at a steady pace is an important piece of running training to build up a base of fitness – often termed a tempo run or threshold training. It is especially good for beginners or runners coming back from injury with a specific term for a low speed, long period and consistent paced run:

LISS - low intensity steady state. This training is largely "aerobic". Where breathed in oxygen is primarily used to generate energy. Runners generally only doing this kind of training will slowly improve but will get to "a plateau" where improvement will be limited.

What is needed to become faster is to practise running faster; obviously! Just increase the effort on runs? Well, yes but doing that over your whole run will be hard to maintain. A better way is to split your run into sections (intervals: there is that word again!). Each interval you can run much faster than over your whole run as after each interval you stop, walk or do a slow jog to recover. The recovery should be long enough to get your breathing back to normal ready for the next interval. Ideally each interval should run at the same hard intensity level as the first. So don't go too mad on the first few intervals.

Important note: If you are going to do intervals, ensure to fully warm up for a minimum of 5 minutes or more in cold weather, with a slow jog slowly increasing in speed. This to get the body ready for the intense effort and warm down after. Doing intense efforts from the off and you risk muscle and tendon damage. These can take an age to repair. You've been warned!

The running on the intervals, if you are trying hard enough, will be "anaerobic" where you will be relying much more on stored energy sources. The main being where glycogen is used for energy. This process creates lactate leading to a rapid increase in fatigue i.e. "the burn". Putting your body through this extends the time before you become fatigued, increases lung capacity, increases the amount of oxygen taken in and how fast it can get to where you need it: the muscles (termed VO₂ max), increases the pace you can go over your whole run/race and is useful for getting up hills and the sprint at the finish line.

Types of interval training:

Consistent long intervals: if you are training for a 10km race something like 10 times 1km intervals or 6 times 1 mile intervals: total interval distance should ideally match the race length. Use a watch, if you know how long your Km or miles take for the interval.

Consistent shorter intervals: such as intervals of a 2 minutes, 1 minute or even 30 seconds.

Pyramid intervals: this is what we often do on a Wednesday evening training session. Longer intervals first before the intervals get shorter then get longer again, such as 3 minutes, 2 minutes, 1 minute, 2 minutes, 3 minutes and repeat.

Upside down pyramid intervals: short interval first, longer in middle then back to short again: 1 minute, 2 minutes, 3 minutes, 2 minutes, 1 minute and repeat.

Sawtooth intervals: such as 1 minute, 2 minute, 3 minute then back to 1 minutes and repeat.

Fartlek: Swedish for speed play. Here intervals vary dependant on the route and how you feel. Intervals could be between power line poles, the stretch of straight road you are on or fast up the next hill.

Hill reps: fast uphill and recover going downhill.

After each interval remember to allow enough time for your body to recover, so you can give the same amount of effort to each interval as the first.

There is also, where you have limited time, intense intervals (a minute or less) with short recoveries: termed **HIIT** - high intensity interval training. Hard!