

The Five Racing Abilities

Once you are clear about the race you want to train for, then you can design a regimen of workouts that will build the various abilities you'll need to perform your best. To do so, you'll need a working understanding of the five racing abilities: stamina, power, tempo, speed, and endurance.

These terms may be different from the ones you are used to using, so please keep an open mind as you try to understand the concepts each term designates. One way to understand these concepts is to compare them. Stamina and endurance, for instance, seem to mean about the same thing, but they have entirely different meanings, with drastic implications for the way you would structure your workouts to build them.

Stamina is the ability to run long and slow, while endurance is the ability to sustain uncomfortable race exertion. A stamina workout is based on light-exertion, comfortable running, while an endurance workout is based on race-specific exertion. The second half of a race is when endurance comes into play, because that's when you become fatigued and may have to endure the discomfort associated with sustaining racing tempo until the finish.

Tempo and speed are also distinctly different concepts. Tempo is the ability to run comfortably at race pace, while speed is the ability to sprint or surge faster than race pace. Tempo is a crucial ability because it determines the rate at which your arms and legs will be able to move during the race. If you want to race at a quick tempo, for instance, you've got to practice a quick tempo. It's that simple. Moreover, you've got to be able to maintain that tempo for the first half of your racing distance without running into major fatigue and discomfort.

Tempo—not speed—is the ability that makes you a faster racer. This is partly because tempo training is usually high-volume training (compared with speed work). Depending on your racing distance and your capacity for exertion, you might run as many tempo miles in a workout as you will in the race. By contrast, you don't need a lot of speed work in order to be prepared to sprint in a race. It's usually sufficient to tack on a little speed work at the end of a tempo workout, when you are already warmed up for quicker running, and you can safely increase your exertion a notch above the tempo level.

Generally, tempo training is intervallic, meaning you repeat bouts of tempo running with intervals of much slower jogging. Rest-jogs have the effect of keeping your tempo running from becoming as intense as it can be during a race. Similarly, relatively short tempo intervals also keep the workout from becoming as intense as an endurance workout or speed work, where your purpose is to practice intensity, rather than tempo, per se.

Speed—as an ability—is actually more closely associated with muscle strength, or power. In order to accelerate, you need power, which is the ability to appear relaxed while sustaining a particular racing pace. Some races are short enough that you can run at a fast tempo the whole way. Since a fast tempo is associated with a forced level of exertion, having power means you are strong enough to appear relaxed while you are forcing a fast pace during the first half of a race. It takes practice to run relaxed at race pace without straining long before the finish.

Hill work is the traditional way to build muscle strength for running. Hill work is a form of resistance training. The faster you run or the steeper the hill, the greater the resistance you encounter. The key to optimizing the resistance of a hill run is to practice the specific level of resistance needed in the race. Thus, light to steady state hill work is appropriate for a marathon, while faster hills at higher levels of exertion are more appropriate for a 5K.

To race effectively you'll need a full complement of five racing abilities, each developed with a specific race in mind. Since you must practice an ability in order to build it, you've got to know how to structure workouts to build a race-specific ability. Every workout should have a purpose, and you should be clear about the exertion structure that will achieve that purpose.

In the adrenalin rush of an invigorating workout, it's easy to lose your focus and run too fast, thereby building an unintended ability. Suppose, for instance, while running tempo intervals, you begin running significantly faster than race pace. Not only do you risk making the workout harder than optimal, you would be practicing speed instead of tempo.

The discipline of training is to do the workout as intended. If you are scheduled to run, say, eight tempo intervals at a certain heart rate, it doesn't make sense to run them harder because "it feels good," or because you can run them harder. If you run them harder, you risk becoming sick, injured or exhausted.

In the final analysis, you will adapt to the stress of effort, not pace. The effort of the workout should be sufficient to build your ability. Therefore, our discipline is to repeat the exertion structure of the workout. If your pace improves within that structural context, you know your ability is growing.