

## Racing And Specificity

If you are a competitive runner, you are naturally concerned about improving your racing performances. Your ability to perform grows as you adapt to the stress of a series of workouts that simulate some aspect of the race you want to run.

Since you will train with a particular race in mind, you should decide what race you are training for before you begin. This means declaring your intention to run a certain race on a certain date. It also means identifying the specific exertion structure of that race.

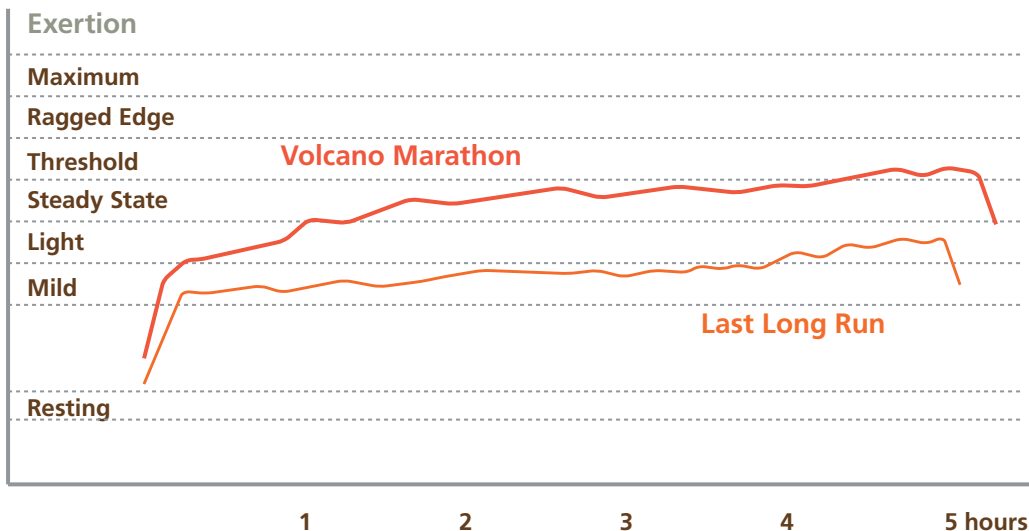
The structure of a race is simply the path exertion takes from moment to moment during the run. (I wrote about exertion in the first article in this series.) You can measure exertion with a heart rate monitor. Or you can measure the other components of exertion, such as your rate of breathing, the amount of muscle strength you use to maintain a pace, the rate at which your arms and legs are moving, and the relative comfort or discomfort in your experience.

The faster you run, the higher your exertion will rise on the pace exertion scale: mild, light, steady state, threshold, ragged edge, and maximum. Since each of these exertion levels have distinct characteristics, once you learn to distinguish between them, you'll know how hard you are running from moment to moment during any run.

So what will the exertion structure of the race you want to run look like? You'll need to answer two key questions: Approximately how long will it take you to finish the race? And approximately what level of exertion can you sustain for that length of time? Notice, I'm not asking you to predict your fastest possible finish time. Your finish time will take care of itself once you have increased your current ability to race your chosen distance. All you need initially is a rough estimate of how long it will take you to finish your goal-race.

Similarly, you don't need to know exactly what your average heart rate will be during the race. But you should know what you're willing and able to sustain for that duration. On this basis you can begin to structure your workouts to build the specific abilities necessary to run the race you envision. Typically, a race has a higher average level of exertion than a workout. Take a look, for instance, at Figure 6-1, which shows my heart rate for the 1999 Kilauea Volcano Wilderness Marathon (top curve) and my last training run before the race (bottom curve).

**Figure 6-1: Marathon Race and Last Long Run**



The race was run on difficult trails and a hilly course. By contrast, the workout was run on a flat, grassy surface. But the terrain and running surface were not particularly important to the ability-building purpose of the workout. I was more concerned about its duration. Since I knew the race would last about four hours and thirty minutes, I had decided months before the race to do a series workouts that would increase my ability to run for that amount of time.

I began the building process six months ahead of the race and slowly added to the duration of the workout as my energy allowed. The first workouts in the series were only about ninety minutes long. But as my stamina grew, I increased the duration of the workout while maintaining an average heart rate of about 122 beats per minute (bpm). I wasn't particularly concerned about how fast I would run the workout, because it wasn't my intention to build my tempo ability with the long run.

Rather, my average heart rate for the workout as a whole had to be low enough to keep from blowing myself away with a harder workout. Remember, adaptation occurs in the context of harmonious effort/energy combinations. Thus, the long run was usually a hard/ready effort—even at the end of the series when it was four hours and forty minutes long.

The racing effort itself was an amalgam of all the abilities I had built during the training period, and it ended up being an all-out/eager effort with an average heart rate of 155 bpm. I was prepared to sustain that level of exertion because I had done other workouts that built my tempo and endurance abilities. Defining the array of racing abilities is the subject of the next article.