

The Right-Effort Question

Suppose you were trying to establish a new workout. You want to build your ability to sustain a slow pace, meaning light exertion. Given light exertion pacing from start to finish of your new workout, how will you know when you have run long enough to stimulate improved performance, without injury, illness or exhaustion?

The more fundamental way to ask this question is: how much workout effort is optimal? Remember, the first article in this series indicated that the longer you run the harder a workout becomes. If you run too long you could become sick, injured or exhausted. On the other hand, if you don't run long enough you might not exercise your ability at an adaptive level. So how long should the workout be to optimize your overall effort?

Every thoughtful runner has dealt with the question of how to optimize workout effort. The answer isn't necessarily apparent from a mere consideration of the six levels I mentioned in the second article on workout effort. For instance, which of the following levels of workout effort do you suppose is optimal: very easy, easy, moderate, hard, very hard or all-out? This is a tricky question, for plausible answers fade into implausibility as new possibilities occur.

Assuming the optimal effort is the one that feels neither too hard, nor too easy, but just right, which level is the right effort? In fact, there isn't a single right effort that applies to every run. This is because there are two essential aspects of every run: effort and energy. And it's always a strategic blunder to consider effort without considering energy. It follows that the best answer to the right-effort question is: it depends on your level of energy.

You are either running too hard, too easy or just right for the energy of any workout. In order to get workout effort right, you must gauge it to accommodate your workout energy, including both your energy in the moment and the pattern of running energy that develops during the run as a whole.

Thus, the apparently simple matter of choosing the one "right" effort out of six levels has been complicated by a factor of five. For six levels of effort and five patterns of energy make a total of thirty effort/energy combinations (see Figure 4-1).

Figure 4-1: Thirty Effort/Energy Combinations

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|-------------------|----------------------|-------------------|------------------|-------------------|-------------------|
| All-Out: | All-Out / Sluggish | All-Out / Tired | All-Out / Lazy | All-Out / Ready | All-Out / Eager |
| Very Hard: | Very Hard / Sluggish | Very Hard / Tired | Very Hard / Lazy | Very Hard / Ready | Very Hard / Eager |
| Hard: | Hard / Sluggish | Hard / Tired | Hard / Lazy | Hard / Ready | Hard / Eager |
| Moderate: | Moderate / Sluggish | Moderate / Tired | Moderate / Lazy | Moderate / Ready | Moderate / Eager |
| Easy: | Easy / Sluggish | Easy / Tired | Easy / Lazy | Easy / Ready | Easy / Eager |
| Very Easy: | Very Easy / Sluggish | Very Easy / Tired | Very Easy / Lazy | Very Easy / Ready | Very Easy / Eager |

Figure 4-1 is a graphic way of illustrating the gamut of effort/energy combinations. The figure is a matrix with thirty cubby-holes, covering the array of combinations from very easy/sluggish (at the bottom-left) to all-out/eager (at the top-right).

Figure 4-1 also features five optimal workout combinations (the shaded cubby-holes). There is an optimum level of workout effort associated with each pattern of workout energy. No matter how your energy develops during a run (sluggish, tired, lazy, ready, or eager), you can always optimize your workout effort with it.

The distinguishing mark of right-effort training is always a sense of harmony. An optimal workout effort seems to be in harmony with your energy. Harmony refers to a sense of agreement or accord. You aren't burdened or oppressed by the workout; rather, you feel at least satisfied by it. Thus, for instance, an easy workout can be satisfying when you are tired, but a hard workout when you are tired would feel distinctly dissonant.

I began this article by asking how long you should run at light exertion in order to optimize the effort of a new workout. You may continue running at light exertion as long as your workout effort doesn't exceed a level dictated by the pattern of energy that develops during the workout. In other words, you may run just long enough to harmonize your effort with your energy.

Since your energy can be drastically different from day to day, consistency demands that you schedule your energy as intelligently as you schedule your workouts. This raises the issue of scheduling, which is the subject of the next article.