

Fartlek Training 101

- *By Pete Rea | For Active.com*

Fartlek training has played an integral role in the training of many of the world's best middle and long distance runners for generations. From the 800 meters to the marathon, men and women from around the world employ the simple concept of shifting gears to improve speed, power and endurance. If implemented properly, fartlek training can become a powerful weapon in your running arsenal.

Where Did Fartlek Workouts Originate?

Historically, most credit Gosta Holmer, the late great Swedish coach, with being the first man to utilize fartlek training with his athletes. Holmer, himself a Swedish Olympic decathlete (1912), turned his attention to reviving the country's national cross country program after his own athletic career had ended. Fartlek is derived from the Swedish word meaning "speed play," and Holmer's original intention was to teach athletes to throw injections of speed, which varied in duration and intensity, into otherwise controlled aerobic efforts. The results for the Swedes were overtly positive. While the global distance running scene was dominated at the time by the Finns, Sweden began to create cracks in this dominance; Holmer was credited with his introduction of fartlek training.

Structured Fartleks vs. "True" Fartleks

Holmer's sessions were, unlike most structured fartlek sessions of today, very much unstructured. Holmer would simply yell, "begin" and, "end" randomly as his athletes ran through the Swedish countryside. Some pick-ups would be a mere 15 to 30 seconds in length and others would last for 3 to 5 minutes. Rather than the watch, Holmer said he was fond of using landmarks such as trees, sign posts or homes as places to begin the surges. Rather than prescribed times, he would simply offer a number of pick-ups for the session and leave length as well as duration up to the athlete. Structured fartleks based on set times for the surge or pick-up as well as for the recovery are more common among runners today. At ZAP Fitness, we use both the natural unstructured sessions as well as the structured. Early in the aerobic building process of base-phase training (generally three or four months or more removed from target races), we will commonly implement unstructured "as-you-feel" sessions where we dictate a total amount of pick-up time, and allow the athletes to determine the length and intensity of the fartlek engagements as well as the recovery time.



Early-Season Fartleks

- Implement as you begin to ramp up volume 10 to 16 weeks from your targeted event
- Select an amount of "fartlek time" for the workout. I suggest a minimum of 10 minutes and a maximum of 25 to 30 minutes. After warming up for 15 to 20 minutes with relaxed running, throw in some gentle, controlled surges. These accelerations in tempo are not terribly hard; they should be a subtle pick-up of perhaps 10 to 15 seconds per mile faster than normal training pace.
- Recruit a partner and take turns deciding the length and speed of the pick-up. When you reach the predetermined time of your pick-ups, cool down for 15 minutes.

Race-Specific Fartleks

As you get closer and closer to your target races, you can tailor your fartleks more to your target race. For example, if you are getting ready for the 5K, particularly if you have little or no access to a quality track,

implement a VO2 Max stimulus fartlek 2 to 3 times in the final six weeks prior to your targeted event. Examples:

- After a proper warm-up of 15 to 20 minutes of jogging then light drills and strides, run two sets of 3 to 4 x 2 to 3 minutes at goal 5K race pace or even a touch faster.
- Run 1 minute "on" and 1 minute "off." In the 1990s, I trained with Mexican national champion Marcos Barreto, and his favorite session was a simple 10 sets of 1 minute "on" and 1 minute "off" preceded by a proper warm-up and followed by a relaxed cool-down jog. As Barreto approached his race season fitness, he would commonly run his 1-minute pick-ups close to his 5K race pace, and his recovery was very easy (a virtual walk). This contrasts starkly to the way he would execute this same session 12 to 14 weeks earlier in his ramp-up, when his 1-minute "ons" would be no quicker than roughly half marathon race pace and the recovery "offs" a mere 10 to 15 seconds per mile slower.
- Gear-change fartlek: Common with both the Ethiopian and Moroccan Federations (hint - they are good) are specific race fitness workouts where pick-ups will be a surge within the surge. My favorite of these types of sessions are 1:30 second pick-ups / fartleks with the opening and closing 30 second blocks at roughly 5k rhythm and the middle 30 seconds of each 1:30 a touch quicker. In other words you are teaching your body to change gears slightly even within an already fast pace. Recovery between each surge should be even (1:30) or even 2:00 + easily particularly if this is the first execution of this type of session.

Secret Weapon: Long-Run Fartleks

Marathoners of the world take note: For almost a decade I have been implementing a type of fartlek which may seem rather innocuous; however, if implemented properly, this workout can be one of the most effective weapons against marathon "bad patches" and late-marathon dead legs.

During your longest run of the week, throw in a simple 1-minute pick-up every 8 to 10 minutes. This surge should be assertive but only as quick as you can return to your normal pre-surge rhythm after you have done the 1-minute pick-up.

As you creep closer to your goal race, sprinkle in some longer pick-ups in addition to the 1-minute surges. Four to six weeks out from your first big race, try a long run with pick-ups of 1:00 - 1:00 - 2:00 - 1:00 - 3:00 - 1:00 - 4:00 - 1:00 - 2:00 - 1:00 with 8 minutes between each pick-up over the last 1.5 hours of your long run. In the mid 1970s to 80s Greater Boston Track Club coach and legend Bill Squires utilized these long run engagements to great success with the likes of Bill Rodgers, Dick Beardsley and other top marathoners of that era.

When to Utilize Fartlek Training

As you can see there are a thousand different variations of fartleks that can be implemented at any part of your training. I believe that anything that can be done on a track, from basic aerobic development to threshold stimulus to specific buffering sessions and power development, can be done in the context of a fartlek. While the workouts will (and should) change in the nature of their intensity and physiological focus as prime racing season gets closer, there is little that cannot be achieved on the parks and roads of the world.

How to Implement Fartleks

Getting started is easy, but be certain not to overdo a good thing. If you are new to fartlek training, I recommend a simple "light ladder" session during the base-building phase of 1:00 - 2:00 - 3:00 - 2:00 - 1:00 surges completed at a moderate 80 percent clip with equal time for recovery. As you gain fitness, these sessions can increase in volume as well as their specific physiological targets.

Should You Utilize Fartleks?

In a word, yes. There is no other type of training for endurance athletes that can blend all your physiological needs in virtually any setting. From effort-based true fartleks, which Holmer championed, to the more regimented fartleks seen more commonly today, fartlek training will not only make your race preparation more enjoyable, but it will also give you the tools for more effective racing.

About the Author



Pete Rea

ZAP Fitness is a Reebok sponsored nonprofit facility that supports post-collegiate distance runners in Blowing Rock, North Carolina. ZAP puts on adult running camps during the summer, and is available for retreats all year. The facility has a state-of-the-art weight room, a bio-lab for physiological testing and a 24-bed lodge. Coaches at the facility include two-time Olympic trials qualifier Zika Rea, Ryan Warrenburg and head coach Pete Rea. Visit zapfitness.com, check out ZAP's [Facebook page](#) for more info, or call 828-295-6198.