

5 Running Tips to Get You Race Ready for Spring

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Spring is coming soon. I promise. As the weather warms, the racing season will heat up, and you'll want to be prepared. Get race ready for spring with these five training ideas.

Running Tip 1: Turn 'Em Over

The first few races in spring are a shock to the system, particularly the legs. Early-season races can feel like you're sprinting the entire time since winter forces most of us to do more easy running and fewer fast workouts.

To fix this problem, include regular leg turnover workouts for the rest of the winter. These workouts remind the neuromuscular system (the brain, nervous system and their coordination with the muscles) what it's like to run quickly. The good news is that these workouts aren't "hard." They are simply short, quick "strides" that help maintain your turnover so those first few races aren't such a shock to the body.

At least once per week—and at minimum once every two weeks—complete this leg turnover workout: Alternate 20 seconds at your 5K race pace followed by 1 minute at your easy run pace. An example for a 30-minute run would be:

*10 minutes at easy run pace as a warm-up

*10 minutes alternating 20 seconds of quick striding with 1 minute of easy running

*10 minutes at easy run pace as a cooldown

One final note: Leg turnover workouts aren't just for "fast" runners, they are for all runners. When my beginning runners do this workout, they get a quick boost in fitness, find their easy run pace gets faster, learn better running form, and feel better running fast. That's a win-win-win-win!

Running Tip 2: Fix Your Weak Link

What area of your body is the first to get sore or injured during training? This is your "weak link," and winter is the time to fix it once and for all.

Step 1: Determine why that area causes problems. Usually it's either inflexible, weak or has leftover scar tissue from previous injuries. A good therapist can help you determine the cause. Step 2 (here's the hard part): Commit to a daily routine of fixing the issue. Yes, I said daily.

My weak link is my lower left leg. So, every day I use the foam roller and massage roller for 10 to 20 passes up and down the lower leg. I also work on flexibility, with specific stretches for the muscles on the front, side and back. In total, this takes me 2 to 3 minutes, an amount of time we can all agree to find in each day. Oh, and I keep these massage tools right beside my desk so when I need a break from sitting, I know just how I can occupy my time.

The bottom line is that if we all just did a little preventative maintenance on the area each day—and winter is the perfect time to start—we could keep the injury bug at bay. Hate being injured? Then fix your weak link.

Running Tip 3: More Oxygen Please

When you run fast, you breathe faster because your muscles need more oxygen. So, a goal for all runners should be to increase oxygen delivery and, believe it or not, winter is the perfect time to do just that.

Winter running is often slower running due to the weather and compromised footing. Many runners stress out about the slower pace and worry that they are losing fitness. They need not worry. Slow running is a great way to boost your ability to use oxygen.

Any time you run at an easy pace, you are improving your ability to deliver oxygen to the working muscles. The heart ejects more blood with each beat, you grow more arteries (called capillaries) that surround your muscles and deliver oxygen-rich blood, and you grow more mitochondria (the energy plants within the muscles). Heck, you might even be able to run a few more miles per week in the winter since your pace is slower.

All of these adaptations improve your ability to use oxygen more efficiently and, when running slowly, you strengthen your muscles, tendons, ligaments and bones, which will keep you injury free. All good stuff for runners, so learn to be OK with slowing down in the winter. Just tell yourself you're doing it for the oxygen.

Running Tip 4: The Pre-Hab Habit

Hold your hand up if you get injured. OK. It seems like every runner does, but there's a way to injury-proof yourself. I call it your pre-hab routine. You need to develop an individualized pre-hab routine so you don't have to do a rehab routine.

Talk to a personal trainer or search for routines on the Web, but come up with a routine that takes 5 to 10 minutes to complete. The routine should include exercises to improve:

1. Core stability. Planks are an easy one to include
2. Balance. Standing on one leg for 15 to 30 seconds while moving your arms in the running motion works well
3. Mobility. I prefer Active Isolated Flexibility as a way to keep muscles and joints supple and moving freely
4. Overall muscular strength. You don't have to be a body builder but you should complete some exercises to maintain fitness in all of your major muscle groups.

It doesn't have to be complicated. In fact, make it easy to complete because then you're more likely to keep doing it. The key here isn't exactly what you do but more that you simply come up with a pre-hab habit so that when spring arrives and training (and life) picks up speed, you'll have your routine dialed in.

At minimum, you must perform your pre-hab routine once each week, but I find that 2 to 3 times per week is much better for creating the habit and building an injury-resistant body.

Running Tip 5: Pace Practice

Another issue with early season racing is proper pacing. We always seem to go out too fast the first mile during races, or at least I do. The remedy: Include a few pace practice workouts throughout the winter. As with the leg turnover workouts, these are not difficult workouts to complete. They are simply a way to stay in touch with race pace so that when the gun goes off, you don't find yourself out in front of the lead runners.

Race Pace Practice Workouts

*For 5K racers: 10 x 400m at 5K race pace with 200-meter jog between

*For 10K racers: 5 x 800m at 10K race pace with 400m jog between

*For half marathoners: 3 miles at half marathon race pace

*For marathoners: 6 miles at marathon race pace

Include pace practice workouts every 2 to 4 weeks because they add some variety to your training, and keep you connected with your race goals even when the weather is dreary and spring seems so far away.

Winter training can be tough but it doesn't mean that significant improvements in your running can't be made. Incorporate these five tips over the next few weeks, and get ready for a spring filled with warm sunshine and sparkling new PRs.

Greg McMillan, M.S. provides training plans and online coaching for runners of all abilities through his website. Outside Magazine calls his McMillan Running Calculator the "Best Running Calculator" and his latest book, YOU (Only Faster), continues to receive rave reviews from runners and coaches. Coach McMillan has a masters degree in exercise physiology and is a USATF Level II and Lydiard Level V certified coach. Follow him on Twitter @gregmcmillan and on Facebook.