

THE BUILDING BLOCKS OF ULTRAMARATHON TRAINING

This chapter discusses the major elements of ultramarathon training. You'll first learn about the importance of training volume and long runs as well as how to incorporate back-to-back long runs and speed work into your training. Ultra training isn't always about doing more, so recovery and burnout are discussed at length. Finally, the chapter concludes with a look at why you might want to consider working with a coach as you prepare for an ultra.

Turn Up the Training Volume

There is perhaps no better predictor of ultramarathon success than total training volume. Make consistent, significant mileage a primary goal throughout your ultramarathon training along with logging your long runs. You don't want to overdo it, but one of the best ways to run better at any race length, and especially in ultras, is to run more.

The good news regarding weekly mileage, however, is that you'll be fine whatever your weekly mileage is so long as you get your long runs in. Really. You can complete an ultra and do so with great success without logging more miles on your feet than you do in your car.

Training Pace

Before diving into the details of how much you should be run-

ning, there's the critical or, as it turns out, not so critical factor in your day-to-day training—your standard training pace. My advice? Run comfortably. With the exception of a steep hill here or there, there is no excuse for not being able to talk continually during the vast majority of your training. Unless you are running a road 50k, your average race day pace will likely be slower than your training pace. If you're a competitive runner or a driven personality, it's more likely that you are running too fast during your training runs than too slow.

Weekly Mileage

On the low-mileage end, it would be beneficial, or at least make for a better experience, if you were running at least 35 to 40 miles per week before attempting an ultramarathon. Regular weekly tallies around 50 miles often lead to strong, comfortable ultra finishes. If you log upward of eight weeks near 70 miles per week, you'll be in top form and, if you've had success at other distances, will likely be competitive at many ultras. As for running 100 miles or more per week, very few ultrarunners do so, and many of them are the very best in the sport.

If you're an experienced distance runner—that is, someone who's consistently trained for at least a few years—and you've recently trained for a marathon, aim to run at least as many miles per week in your peak ultramarathon training as you did in your peak marathon training. Likewise, other weeks in your training program should be similar to or slightly higher than their corresponding weeks in your marathon-training schedule.

If you're a newer runner, if you have bumped up to the marathon distance in the past year, or if you've been relatively injury-free at a mileage plateau for a few years, it might now be the time to increase your mileage by 10 miles per week during your peak training.

It can be tempting to attempt a massive jump in overall training volume from one season* to the next. Such a jump is risky and ill

* By a season, I mean five or six months of training followed by a rest period.

advised. Instead, take a long view in which you sequentially increase mileage over multiple seasons. While I can't offer a hard-and-fast rule, I wouldn't advise an experienced runner to increase his or her season-over-season volume by much more than 20 percent. That means a 50-mile-per-week runner could bump up to 60 miles per week, and a 70-mile-per-week runner could target 85 miles per week. Newer runners who have logged 40 or fewer miles per week in previous seasons may be able to increase their mileage more dramatically on a percentage basis. It's not uncommon for a rapidly improving, less experienced runner to increase his or her mileage by 10 or even 20 miles per week from one season to the next.

Increasing Weekly Mileage and the 10 Percent Rule

Whether you make a concerted effort to up your weekly mileage or it comes naturally through exciting, injury-free training, sudden jumps in weekly mileage are a bad idea. They often manifest in injury or training burnout. Focus on making relentless forward progress in training rather than looking for leaps up followed by hard crash landings. Even experienced runners need to remind themselves (or sometimes be reminded by those around them) to aim for a slow, steady progression. It means very little if you are feeling great a week or two after a big jump in mileage, as you may end up paying your dues with an injury a week later or burned out a few weeks before your big race.

You've likely heard of the "10 Percent Rule" for increasing your mileage. If not, it suggests that you increase your weekly mileage by no more than 10 percent week-to-week. In general, it's a great rule to follow. However, there are exceptions. For instance, most experienced runners amp up their mileage faster than 10 percent a week after a rest period—and that's fine. That said, the smart ones apply the principle behind the rule, which is to increase your mileage only in considered, reasonable amounts.

You, too, should apply the 10 Percent Rule more as a guideline

than as a commandment. That's not a ticket to add 15 miles to your total mileage week after week. Instead, it's a call to recognize the arbitrary nature of what constitutes a training week, the arbitrary nature of the rule being exactly 10 percent, and the increased irregularity of weekly mileage in ultramarathon training.

In analyzing increases in your training volume, look beyond your Monday-to-Sunday or Sunday-to-Saturday week. While there is no need to scrutinize every possible seven-day period, keep the possibility of other periods of far-too-quick mileage increase in mind.

For instance, let's say you've been running 45 to 50 miles per week. After taking a few days off from Monday through Wednesday, you end up running 40 miles from Thursday through Sunday. You then kick off the following week with 30 miles from Monday through Wednesday. Regardless of what you plan for the remainder of the second week, with 70 miles in seven days, you likely ran too much in too short a period. There's no need to panic. Simply ease back your training volume by 10 to 15 percent below your established mileage (here, 45 to 50 miles per week) for the following seven days.

More frequent and longer long runs and even the occasional set of back-to-back long runs make your weekly mileage jump around a bit more than during training for a road marathon. Consider keeping a secondary, longer-term measure of training volume, such as a three-week moving average of weekly volume. Such measures are useful not only for warning of short-term overuse and possible resultant injuries, but also as a hedge against cumulative fatigue that can lead to burnout.

The 10 Percent Rule and a regular look at a mileage moving average are useful tools. However, the broad message to remember is that, despite their utility, logging massive miles should not be done at the expense of your physical or mental health. If you need to take a few days off to heal from a minor injury or illness, do so. If the combination of your training and other obligations has you on the

brink of collapse, analyze all your obligations and determine which need to be pared. If that includes cutting your weekly mileage by 10 or 20 miles for a week or two, but being better rested, less stressed, and happier, then you and your running might very well benefit in the long term from a short recovery period. Take care of yourself and make relentless forward progress.

On the Long Run

While total training volume may be the best predictor of ultramarathon success, it is paramount that you include long runs in your ultra training. In fact, it's often better to sacrifice a small amount of training volume in the form of pre- and post-long-run recovery to ensure that you can make the most of your long runs. Similarly, curtail speed work and other intense training as needed to make sure that you can make it through your long runs. You don't need to log a long run every week, but as a general rule, the more long runs, the better.

If you've run one or two marathons, start building up your long runs from shorter distances. Progressively increase that distance more slowly than someone who has cranked out a multiple marathons every year for a few years.

Many marathon programs call for long runs every other week. As you build toward an ultra, try to get in long efforts most weeks. In transitioning to doing so, alternate between shorter and longer long runs to provide relative breaks on a regular basis.

Do not become scared by the numbers that follow. They are a guide for those looking at a long-term buildup prior to running various ultra distances. If you are training for a 50k, log a few runs of around 25 miles with as many 18- to 22-mile runs as you feel comfortable with. For a 50-miler, hit 25 or so miles a couple of times with maybe one effort of around 30 miles. An easy way to log the 30-miler is to run a 50k race as that long run.

Don't run a 100-mile race as your first ultra. Why? Not because

it's impossible, but because your experience is likely to be more pleasant and your chances of finishing higher if you first run a few other ultras. In particular, shoot for running at least one 50k and either a 50-mile or a 100-kilometer event as part of your buildup to the 100-miler. Alternatively, if you want to be an ultramarathon race virgin when you hit the 100-mile starting line, your training might include numerous 20- to 30-mile runs, one in the 30-to-35-mile range, and a 40-to-50-mile run.

In advance of any focus ultramarathon, plan on running two or three tune-up races in which you test your gear, nutrition plan, and fitness. It's perfectly acceptable to run additional races as your long runs, so long as you complete the events without competing. Think of these noncompetitive races as supported long runs with added fans and companions. Do not get in the habit of pushing yourself to complete exhaustion in these "non-races." If you do, you'll be cutting into your weekday training too often while also increasing your risk of injury and fatigue.

As will be discussed in chapter 3, specificity is a key aspect of ultramarathon training. You should log at least a few long runs in conditions that mimic those you're likely to encounter on race day. It's important to match the running surface (road, trail, or trail with very poor footing) and topography of the race (flat, hilly, or mountainous). Similarly, while there's nothing wrong with pushing the pace during an occasional long run, it's critical that some of your long runs mirror the slower pace to be expected during your ultra. Your running gait changes along with your pace, so you'll want to be comfortable and trained to run slower than what feels right for a fresh five mile run around town.



Training on mountainous trails prepares you for racing on mountainous trails. (Photo by Glenn Tachiyama)

Put Your Back into It: Back-to-Back Long Runs

Some ultrarunners swear by back-to-back (B2B) long training runs. They hypothesize that it's necessary to learn how to run on tired legs. However, regularly running a significant portion of your weekly miles on tired legs is asking for injury. Instead, consider using B2Bs judiciously in your ultramarathon training.

For instance, benefits exist in strategically running a B2B three to six weeks before an ultra, especially your first. It's great to have some experience in dealing with heavy, unresponsive legs as well as with a beat-up psyche in advance of race day. There are, of course, the benefits inherent to running extra miles, especially long-run miles. If spaced out with adequate recovery, running two or even three B2Bs in the season leading up to your focus ultra is beneficial.

If you do run one or more B2Bs, be hypervigilant with regard to injury on the second day and in subsequent days. Don't confuse

acute injury-related pain with fatigue or muscle soreness, which is what you are learning to deal with on these runs. Be sure to give yourself adequate recovery following any B2Bs.

If, when planning a B2B, you decide to run one hillier route, such as on mountain trails that will require intermittent hiking, and one entirely runnable effort, schedule the runnable session first. You will have no problem walking up steep climbs and rolling down hills on road-deadened legs, but you aren't very likely to enjoy running for hours straight with an unchanging gait on already tired legs.

Back-to-back runs can also be useful in advanced ultra training. An experienced ultrarunner may head out for massive B2B or even a back-to-back-to-back long weekend shortly before tapering into a big race. This final training push might be as much as 100 miles over a three-day period.

Bonk Runs

A number of elite ultrarunners use an advanced B2B technique known to some as the “bonk run.” On day 1 of this B2B, you complete a moderate-to-high-intensity run of at least 25 miles, but up to 35 miles. While hydration and electrolyte consumption remain important, you don't consume any calories during or in the few hours following the run. The point of the first run is to deplete your muscle glycogen stores. The second run is a more modestly paced run in the 20-to-25-mile range. Again, you abstain from consuming any calories during this second run and don't compensate by having a large, carbohydrate-rich meal beforehand. The more depleted you can keep your glycogen levels for this second run, the better. You are quite likely to feel lethargic, cranky, or downright miserable from late in the first run until you eat after the second run. That's all part of the process.