

Prelude To A Marathon

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“Buy now and avoid the Christmas rush”. Imagine – in June, I actually saw a sign proposing that people start thinking about Christmas. I am fully a believer in “advance planning and preparation”; but to me, even that was a stretch.

One area in which advance planning and preparation will pay dividends (whether you've been naughty or nice!) is in getting yourself ready to prepare for marathon training. The Austin marathon is in February, and many of you have probably just gotten to the point of having defrosted from this year's Freeze-scale Marathon (apologies to Freescale – but this Canadian still found it COLD). Yet here I am proposing that you start thinking about it now.

But it's only June, you reply.

The reality of any training program, anything that stresses the human machine, is that the responses and adaptations to training take time. Sure, you may be doing all the right workouts, but it's your body's ability to adapt to your training demands that is critical. No matter how we look at it, recovery and adaptation take time. Although there are many things that can be done to optimize your recovery (more on that in a later article), time is of the essence.

If there is one aspect that is typically left out of many training programs, for new and experienced runners, it's strength training. There have been so many times in my career as a physical therapist that I have made mention of strength training to a runner only to get that sheepish grin that says “yeah, I know I know I know”. Why are people so averse to strength training? Well, it's simply 'not running'! It's oftentimes inconvenient. Many think that it requires a lot of time that subtracts from their run training, especially when they are training for a marathon.

I constantly remind athletes to have a specific intent or goal for each and every workout – and strength training is no different. In my eyes, strength training is really a means of facilitating recovery – as opposed to “just another workout”; - and recovery is always a good thing! The primary goal is to simply load the muscles and tissues – to give them a stimulus unto which they will adapt. Tissues will remodel dependent upon the demands imposed upon them. For example, an astronaut in space has lower gravitational demands – which subsequently results in decreased strength and bone density. Returning to earth, the tissues need time to adapt to the imposed demands of gravity. Just like remodeling your living room, the final result does take some time but is fantastic when you're finished!

There are a few questions that I get regularly when it comes to strength training ...

Do I need to do a lot of sets and repetitions because I am working on my endurance? The answer is a resounding “no”. You build your endurance with your run training. The intent of the strength training is to build power – and to enhance the integrity of the tissues so that they can withstand increased training demands.

How many sets and repetitions DO I need? If the intent is to alter the structure of the tissues, then they need resistance – enough such that you're only doing one set of 8 to 10 repetitions, but feel like you could do 1 or 2 more repetitions.

If I lift heavy weights, am I at risk of injury? As long as you have a proper warm-up, maybe 5 to 10 minutes on the bike, you will raise your core temperature sufficiently to be able to lift safely. The resistance is based on what YOU feel like you can do – there is no hard and fast rule for how many pounds any given person should lift. If you're 80 or 20, the body still responds to loading.

Won't I get bigger? I don't want more bulk. As long as you maintain one set, you may note some mild changes in muscular definition, but you certainly won't build mass. You'd need to do multiple sets to accomplish this. For those who may question this, I am a living, breathing example of NOT gaining mass! :-)

I've tried strength training before, but it always leaves me sore the next day and unable to run. What do I do? This is typically a result of doing many sets or many repetitions (or both). If you're doing one set of 8 to 10 repetitions, you are providing the body with the intended stimulus, yet not creating a situation in which your body has to recover from a full

“workout”. You may even find that your runs after a strength training session are better simply because you have given your central nervous system a stimulus that gets it “fired up” to work effectively.

What exercises do I need to do? Though I do strongly believe that there is a value to upper body strengthening for runners, let's focus on the lower body, since it's the most prone to injury. The primary muscles that you want to strengthen are the gluteals, quadriceps, hamstrings, calf musculature, and the hip stabilizers. Your program doesn't have to be developed by a rocket scientist – some good, basic exercises work very well. In some light-hearted discussions with some strength-training-averse runners, I have said that if you only had time for one exercise, the best option would be quarter squats/leg presses as they utilize a number of these muscles simultaneously. You can also do hamstring curls, calf raises, and some pulley exercises for all the hip motions.

A strength training program, performed twice a week as part of your weekly training program, will help provide a solid foundation for your run training, improve your performance, and help to keep you out of trouble. Some advance planning now will reap dividends in February – or for any other event for which you may be training. Avoid the Christmas rush – and train now!

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