Welcome back !

***Before you read the following, please note that I am NOT a qualified nutritionalist, coach or a personal trainer. The advice below is based on my own experiences as an elite athlete as well as information gathered from respected sources***

**The Easy Paced Run / Recovery Run:**

My last post highlighted the importance of lactate threshold and how tempo / cruise interval runs should form a key part of any training plan. These sessions are tough but are designed to stimulate the correct physiological response in the muscles to promote improvement.

Before writing about the importance of easy runs it is worth bearing in mind that it can take 4-5 days to recover from a hard tempo run or cruise interval. Improving top end speed endurance takes time. Just by training hard today does not make you a better runner tomorrow. It makes you tired tomorrow! So the body needs to recover from the hard training and this is where the ‘magic’ happens. Rest / easy runs are so important and yet it’s probably one area of training that many athletes get wrong.

Our ability to recover from hard training depends on a number of factors including age, genetics, lifestyle, sleep patterns, diet etc. But the training plan has a major part to play in how well we recover, protect from injury and illness and avoid burn out and overtraining. Remember training should be thought of as a stimulus to maximise your ability defined by your genetic ‘ceiling’ and therefore training plans should be personal and carefully considered if you really wish to be as good as you can be.

So, back to the topic of this post - The Easy run promotes recovery by improving blood flow to muscles (providing nutrients and oxygen and improving rate of repair to damaged muscles), promotes waste removal from the muscles and yet still provides a stimulus for improved fitness in between harder ‘key’ sessions.

**IMPORTANT POINT!!** If the pace is correct, ‘easy’ running will develop the heart muscle since maximum **force** of each heart beat is reached at about 60% of maximum heart rate. As you exercise harder the heart rate and stroke volume (amount of blood pumped per heart beat) increases but the stroke volume doesn’t increase much so although during an easy run you may not think you are working hard your heart actually is.

**IMPORTANT POINT!!**A further and very important benefit of easy runs is that they increase vascularisation in the muscle fibres (more blood vessels supplying oxygen and nutrients to the muscle) as well as other muscle properties that allow the muscle to receive and utilise oxygen (so you have a double of effect of improving oxygen delivery to the muscle as well as their ability to use that oxygen). This improves energy conversion dramatically.

It is important therefore to recognise that some of the key important physiological adaptations to training are reached at sub-maximal intensity levels.

Many of the benefits just mentioned are the product of time and NOT intensity – meaning that it’s more significant the time spent running rather than the intensity. You therefore are more likely to run for longer (in time) if you slow down a bit and in turn this protects from the likelihood of injury.

So, a common mistake is that the Easy runs are done too hard – thereby reversing the effects of recovery and increasing fatigue and therefore significantly reducing the ability to hit the hard sessions hard! The end result is that easy days become too hard and hard days become ineffective!

‘Easy pace’ as a guide should be about 1-2 minutes per mile slower than marathon pace and 2-3 minutes slower than your top end mile race pace. Or if you have access to the Jack Daniels VDOT training pace app then it will estimate your ‘E’ pace based on previous and recent race results. Ultimately, this pace should be considered as a pace that allows you to perform the run or training session with ‘limited stress on the body and mind’.

However, it is equally important not to run so slowly that you compromise running biomechanics and run in an unnatural rhythm as this equally can promote injury. Easy running should be anything but stressful!!

So, easy runs should form a key part of your training week. Personally, I tend to work on a routine of 1-2 hard sessions within the week (or more likely 6-7 hard sessions in a month once I have reached a good level of fitness) and the rest easy running with 1 or 2 days rest per week depending on how I feel.

I include one longer run (at an easy pace) in the week. However, interestingly the ‘Easy Long Sunday run’ is simply just an extension of an easy run done at an easy pace. Remember me saying that many of the benefits of an easy run are the product of time spent running that that pace? So for most endurance runners the long run is obviously important in developing these systems. But it should come as no surprise that when increasing mileage in training in general over the week that most athletes see an improvement in their performances over much shorter distances.

However there is a balance to be struck – too many miles can lead to injury, fatigue and significantly compromises performance so it’s important to know your body and know what it can take.

Do NOT suddenly increase mileage. Most endurance athletes will be aware of the ‘10% rule’ ie not increasing mileage by more than 10% week on week. I prefer to ensure my mileage stays the same for 4 week periods at a time to allow my muscles, tendons and ligaments to ‘catch up’ with my fitness.

Furthermore, it is NOT advisable to add mileage when you are also increasing frequency and / or intensity to your training. YOU WILL BE INJURED BEFORE TOO LONG !! Only increase mileage if the frequency is similar (ie you start running for one extra day per week consider reducing the length of some of your runs to compensate) and the intensity doesn’t change.

Finally, a point about the ‘Law of diminishing return’. This is basically the idea that as you increase mileage in training, the performance of that athlete increases but for every 10 miles extra that they add to their week there is less and less relative improvement to a point where the benefit plateaus and the athletes becomes increasingly more at risk of injury, illness or burnout.

Many athletes will be happy to tell you about their excessive mileage in training. 100+ miles a week blah blah. The more the better right ? This only works to a certain point and if it’s right for that athlete. I recall reading an article about an elite marathon runner (in the sub 2 hrs 20 bracket) who regularly ran in excess of 200 miles per week in training and on one occasion ran a 2 hr 40 marathon as a training session in the middle of one of these crazy 200+ mileage week.

Impressive but you can’t help think that the same end results could have been achieved with less.

My fastest marathon was just outside 2 hrs 30. I can’t remember running more than 60 mile a week in training and more often it would be 45-55 miles at most. Beyond this, I couldn’t recover from hard weeks and I would feel tired and sore.

Perhaps I didn’t do my recovery runs at a pace that would promote recovery. Worth a thought . . . . .

Happy running and enjoy your ‘easy’ runs – remember they are hugely beneficial!!

Take care

Michael Hobbs-Aldridge xx

*Please note: I am not a qualified advisor and I do not hold any specific qualifications related to my chosen physical activity. Any advice I give is general guidance and is in my opinion using my previous experience in this activity. If you choose to take the advice, you are adhering to the advice at your own free will, knowingly and voluntarily exposing yourself to all the potential risks associated.*

*I do not give out any medical advice and any advice given should not replace or in any way interfere with guidance given by a medical professional. Do not disregard professional medical advice or delay seeking it because of the advice given. If you fail to seek medical clearance or ignore medical advice, you do so at your own risk and I shall not be held accountable for any damage and/or injury caused*