

## Designing an Ultra Distance Training Plan

Jason Friedman, MD

“I’ve run a few half marathons and a couple of marathons, and I want to run an ultramarathon, but I’m not sure how to train for it. What do I do?”

Man, if I had a nickel for every time I’ve been asked that question...I could probably buy an energy gel. Maybe two! Truly, though, trying to build out a training plan to tackle a new race distance or format can be daunting. The good news is, *there’s no right approach*. There are many different ways to conceptualize training, and as long as your approach is thoughtful and specific to your own needs, you stand a good chance of success.

Unfortunately, the bad news also is, *there’s no right approach*. There’s no one-size-fits-all, magic formula that will work for everyone. (Probably a good thing for me, or I’d be out of a job.)

However, there are several principles that, while perhaps not universal, should be considered when trying to build a training plan, whether this is your first time tackling the 100-mile distance or you’re a grizzled ultrarunning vet.

- 1. The plan needs to work for you.** Following how the elite athletes are training can be fun, and there are many lessons we can learn from their approach to race prep. But modeling your training off of the behavior of folks who have already won the genetic lottery is fraught with risk. Plus, Jim Walmsley doesn’t have your job, kids, and responsibilities. He can just run! Design a plan that meets the needs of your lifestyle. Otherwise, you won’t be able to stick to it over the long term...or worse, you’ll wind up injured.
- 2. Consistency is king.** This doesn’t mean that you need to run every single day (see below). But there is no substitute for the consistent application of moderate effort over time. Regardless of what workouts you’re doing, the important thing is that you’re doing them, more often than not.
- 3. Variation = breakthroughs.** The body is an incredible machine, and adapts to stress remarkably well. This adaptation to stress is the goal of training—that’s how we build fitness. However, if we keep the stresses the same, we don’t force new adaptations, and fitness can stagnate. We see this often in athletes who do all of their training at generally the same pace or effort level. After a while, once you’ve adapted to that level, all the miles in the world at that intensity aren’t going to lead to much further development. By mixing in specific workouts with different intensities, we are constantly challenging the system to adapt—leading to breakthroughs in fitness.
- 4. Most of the time, slow down. But sometimes, speed up!** If we want variable responses, we need to include some running at higher intensity. In order to get the most out of those workouts, they need to not only be designed to be difficult—we need to actually run them at a high enough intensity to get the intended benefit. You can’t run that hard all the time...but some people fall into the trap of, “If a little speed is good, more speed is better.” The most common mistake in training among inexperienced (and, frankly, experienced) runners is *running their easy runs too hard and their hard runs too easy*. If you’re running too fast on your easy days, you’re not recovering enough to put forward enough effort on your hard days to make them worthwhile....and pretty soon, you’ve lost all of the variability we were trying to build into the program.

5. **Weaknesses first, strengths later.** A training plan need to be periodized over time—again, we can't keep introducing the same stress over and over and expect different results. Your schedule should include not just day-to-day variability but also should modify the training focus over the course of weeks and months. Early in the season, months away from your goal race, focus on areas where you struggle. If you're able to run all day but your six-year-old can outsprint you, spend the first part of your season working on speed. If you can win your local 5K, but the thought of tackling a four-hour run terrifies you, build up a big aerobic base before honing that speed closer to race day.
6. **Go from less specific to more specific.** Different race distances require different skills, and trail running throws in the added variables of terrain, elevation, and unpredictable weather. Early on, your training should be fairly generalized—focus on aerobic development, running economy, and overall strength and fitness. As race day approaches, training should become more specifically tailored towards the conditions you'll encounter during the event. This might mean a focus on uphill and/or downhill running, improving technical trail skills, or acclimatizing to heat or altitude if your target race includes these elements.
7. **Don't neglect rest.** The adaptations to stress that lead to fitness occur during times of recovery. Without allowing for adequate recovery, these adaptations cannot take place. Over time, being chronically under-recovered leads to poor performance and ultimately places you at high risk for injury. Individual needs will vary, but I like my athletes to take at least one complete rest day each week, with very few exceptions.

There are many other elements that contribute to successful race preparation: mental training, nutrition, sleep, strength training and injury prevention, gear selection, developing a schedule of prep races, pacing and strategy, and more. But a well-considered and individualized training plan is paramount. The basic principles outlined here can help you establish a framework; there are numerous books and on-line resources that can help you flesh out specifics of your training plan. Or, connect with an experienced coach who can help guide you on this amazing journey.

## About the Author

As a physiologist and physician, I believe in integrating the scientific aspects of training with the joy and appreciation for the sport I've gained over thirty years of running and racing on trails, roads, and track. My goal is to help build a varied, sensible training plan that fits into your busy lifestyle, and will help you reach the finish line happy, healthy, and enthusiastic for whatever challenges lie ahead.

### Education & Certifications

- Physician and Physiologist
- USATF 1

### Background:

- Ultra Distance/Trail Runner/Road Racing/ Exercise Physiology

### Philosophy:

- Integrating scientific aspects of training toward the achievement of your goals



Race Resume:

- USATF National Champion (40-44), 100K Trail
- Top-10 finishes at national championships at 50K, 50M, 100K, 100M, and 24 hours
- “Big Buckle” at 2018 Leadville 100 in 22:40
- Over forty ultramarathon finishes,
- Two-time finalist for RunUltra Blogger of the Year.

Links:

- <http://gunksrunner.com>
- <http://gunksrunner.com/paincave>