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THE LONG AND SHORT OF RACING

BY BEN DUFFUS | PHOTOS BY SUNNY LEE

As a trail runner who primarily focuses on ultras, but still enjoys racing hard at events under 10km, I'm often asked, "Which distance is more difficult?" To which I usually respond, "It depends." While long events entail hours of pain, at any given moment the pain pales in comparison with what you might experience at the end of a 5km race — if you're racing to your limit.

I started off my running career, back in high school, focusing on 4-6km cross-country races, before moving up to 8km mountain races in my late teens, and then scaling up to ultras after that. Like many budding ultra runners, I stopped doing all speed-work in favour of moderate to long, easy-paced runs, day in day out. This was fun for a while, but resulted in an unsuccessful first year of ultras, being plagued by constant niggles. I had lost a lot of my former speed, and while I could comfortably run for 2-4h, anything beyond that remained a major struggle.

Reintroducing training methods like speed-work and strength workouts not only helped me regain some of my former speed but was critical in my progression as an ultra runner. To put it simply: Being able to run faster helps with running slower for longer. The improvements in VO2 max, lactate utilisation, dynamic flexibility, and running economy, all of which are results of doing speed-work, will benefit running at any distance.

Of course, training for a 5km won't maximise your ability to run 100km, nor will training for 100km maximise your ability to run 5km. Although similar ingredients go in to the training programs for both distances, it is the subtle way in which these ingredients are put together that is important.

Take our first example of speed-work. While many elite marathon (and under-marathon) runners will be running 2-3 speed sessions per week, for ultra run-

ners two such sessions per week is plenty. Training for an event should become more specific as you get closer to it. The start of a training block for a 5km race would be dominated by longer, slower efforts like tempo runs, before progressing to 5km race-pace intervals more intimately resembling our focus race. Someone training for 100km would do this in reverse order.

Most good training programs will involve a regular long run — but 'long' is a relative term in training. If your goal race lasts for less than 30min, then 90min would be a sufficient over-distance training stimulus. However, if you're training for a race lasting 10h, or more, then over-distance training isn't really an option — it'd simply take you too long to recover.

Several weeks of 3-4h runs will lay a solid base, and some 5-7h runs in the 1-2 months before the race is the real icing on the cake. Back-to-back long runs are a great way to replicate the fatigue of an

ultra. For example, you might head out for a 4h run on the first day and then aim to back that up with a 3h run the following day. To progress this even farther, try finishing the second run by picking up the intensity a little bit in the last 30min.

I often encourage athletes I coach to use races of different distances to help prepare for their goal race. Races shorter than your goal event will develop your speed and hone your racing ability while impacting less stress on the body than your goal race's distance will. If your goal is 15km, or shorter, then over-distance races may not only help improve endurance but also make the shorter goal race seem 'easier.' Another aspect of training that can help at all distances is strength-work. It can prevent and manage injuries, improve running economy, and condition our legs to better cope with the relentless pounding of long distances.

And just as the exercises we choose need to be specific to our running — bicep curls aren't going to help much here! — the number of sets and reps we do should be specific to our event. A growing body of research indicates that training for power with heavy lifts (less than five reps) and explosive plyometrics can make a runner more economical in events lasting up to 30min, and will particularly assist with a finishing sprint. The types of muscle fi-

bres such training targets aren't as relevant in an ultra, where we never need to exert maximal power but instead rely on producing a low level of force all day (and sometimes into the next day, and sometimes beyond that). For ultra training, higher repetitions of single-leg exercises and plyometrics are the more-specific choice of exercises.

Our sport is filled with athletes — think Kilian Jornet, Emelie Forsberg, or Max King — who can win highly competitive 5km and 100km races in the same season. Personally, I tend to perform best at 5-10km races coming off the back of (or while in the midst of) training for an ultra. It's generally difficult to perform well in ultras without sufficiently long runs, but a runner doing regular long runs of 3h, or more, in combination with the right type of speed-work will never be too far from their peak, no matter the distance.

If you're thinking that you might enjoy trying a new race distance, the only way to know is to give it a go. There's no minimum or maximum distance for enjoying the trails, so give it a go — it's sure to be an interesting experience! **AT**

Ben is an elite ultra marathon runner with podium finishes all around the globe. If you want help pursuing your trail running goals, he also offers online coaching at www.mile27.com.au.

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