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4 Rules of Periodization to Help You Reach Your Peak

Periodization—planning phases of your training—can take different forms, but follows universal rules that will help you get the most from your training.

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If you, like many runners, build your own training plans, understanding periodization is important to help you get the most from your training and race your best.

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Periodization is an exercise science term that simply means proper planning by breaking your training into segments, or periods. The objective is to plan your running in such a way as to give you the best possible chance of running your best at a certain time—usually a goal race.



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To accomplish the goal of one peak performance, you manipulate different elements of training over the season. These elements include:

- Weekly mileage / total volume
- Recovery and rest
- Intensity or the overall difficulty of training
- Race-specificity of workouts

Periodization describes the evolution of your training from the beginning of a season to the goal race. This general framework may take several forms, but they all focus on increasing the specificity of training to help you achieve peak performance.

	Weeks out/ emphasis	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday	Sunday
Planned	0	On course: 5k time trial						
Actual	strength		5 miles					
Planned	9							
Actual	strength	on course: 7 x 1000m seconds with 30 seconds rest.	Strength runs throughout. 5 miles					
Planned	8	Progression 20 minutes out steady, <30 hard ending at race pace.						
Actual	strength and turnover	strong -- top guys back in, 14-15 minutes, race pace workout						
Planned	7	4 miles + 8-10k Cemetery route						
Actual	specific aerobic/aerobic support	As planned. Strong - not much one hand -- 8 total						
Planned	6	3-5 x 1200m @ goal HR, with equal rests + Strength						
Actual	speed intro							

Linear vs. Nonlinear Periodization

Two major types of periodization are commonly used among coaches: linear and nonlinear periodization.

Most runners are more familiar with linear periodization because it is older and was popularized by the legendary New Zealand coach Arthur Lydiard. The basic outline of linear periodization includes:

- A base phase of training where the focus is on volume and building aerobic capacity
- A “strength phase” that included hill work with a focus on building strength
- Anaerobic training follows, with a focus on hard workouts
- Finally, a “coordination phase” that would likely be called “peaking” today with a focus on speed and races

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Many runners are familiar with this model as they follow their training plan, with mileage building and then tapering off, while fast workouts get increasingly more difficult throughout the season.

Nonlinear periodization is different in that there is less distinction between the phases of training. Each element of training—endurance, power development, speed, strength, etc.—are always present no matter the time of the season. The only thing that changes is what is being emphasized with increased intensity and/or volume.



photo: 101 Degrees West

For example, in a linearly periodized model, base training does not include any fast repetitions. With nonlinear periodization, however, a coach may assign short, hard repetitions early in the base phase. The distinction is that the number of repetitions will be low and the recovery interval longer. This makes the workout much easier and exposes the athlete to speed, but without making the workout too demanding. The same week may include a small volume of hill work for strength, as well as the higher volume of daily and long runs that are the emphasis of this period.

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Also called “funnel periodization,” this model funnels a runner toward their peak performance without isolating each variable quite so much. You maintain an overall fitness, with adjustments narrowing the training toward specific strengths as you prepare for a goal.

The benefits of nonlinear periodization are that you’ll rarely develop weak links in your fitness due to ignoring some aspect of training (like speed development, for example). This helps avoid the injuries that often occur in the transition between training emphases.

With non-linear periodization, you’ll also be able to take your training in more directions. For example, if you’re well-trained in every element, you can choose to focus on the 5k and the marathon without requiring an extensive base phase of training.

4 Periodization Rules to Follow

No matter what model of periodization that you choose to use in your running, there are several critical principles to follow that will help you achieve peak performance on race day.

The next time you’re planning a season, be sure to follow these rules for best results:

1. Progress from easier to harder.

The beginning of your season should be easier than the middle or end of your season. In other words, the overall intensity should be lower with easier workouts. Note: Easy training doesn’t necessarily mean that all of your running will be at an easy effort. Some elements of speed—like strides or simple fartlek workouts—should still be present, but at a volume that doesn’t stress you excessively.

This helps ensure that you don’t become over-trained or mentally burned out with your training. Runners can manage intense training for about 8-10 weeks but it becomes increasingly difficult to perform well beyond that timeframe.

2. Progress from less to more volume for two-thirds of program.

Overall weekly mileage, the distance of the long run and the volume of speed workouts should generally increase over the course of the season. Most runners aren’t able to hit peak volume at the very beginning of a season, so they’ll need to continue building until the middle or final third of the training cycle.



photo: 101 Degrees West

3. Increase intensity and decrease volume in final third.

Third, the remaining 3-4 weeks of any season should see a peak in intensity but a decrease in weekly mileage. This helps runners feel fast, fit, coordinated, and responsive without feeling too tired. When overall volume decreases but intensity is maintained or increased slightly, runners will be in a better position to have a peak performance race.

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4. Move from general conditional to specific training for your goal over the season.

Finally, training should move from more general conditioning to more specific training at goal race paces for more and more of the race distance. The general conditioning at a range of intensities adapts the body to be able to handle the stresses of more specific training—training to be able to train—providing a platform for the final phases that have only one goal: honing the body and mind to sustain maximum pace over a set distance.



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