



YOU CAN BECOME STRONGER AND FITTER BY RUNNING JUST THREE DAYS A WEEK. HERE'S HOW BY BILL PIERCE

Fast Results

I WAS A SIX-DAY-A-WEEK RUNNER BACK IN THE '80s WHEN I DECIDED TO DO A TRIATHLON, which meant I had to add swimming and cycling workouts to my routine. My training partner, Scott Murr, and I headed out for workout after workout after workout—and quickly hit a training wall. Something had to give, so we did the unthinkable: We ran less. Then came a surprise. My fitness level improved, and despite what conven-

tional wisdom said (run less = slower 10-K), our race times stayed fast.

We were amazed; our experience defied what runners—and researchers, including ourselves—had long believed: that more was better. Scott had recently completed an exercise science degree at Furman University in Greenville, South Carolina, where I was a professor in the health and exercise science department. Our training runs naturally turned into conversations about exercise theory and principles. Before long, we began developing a scientific approach to our new regimen. Since runs were limited, each one had to count, so we played with pace and distance for speed, tempo, and long runs. On off days, we cycled, rowed, and swam, all to answer the question, “What other types of aerobic exercise best complement running?” Eventually, we had the foundation of our program: three quality runs done at prescribed paces coupled with two cross-training days.

In 2003, we, along with Ray Moss, Ph.D., and exercise specialist Mickey McCauley, established the Furman Institute of Running and Scientific Training (FIRST) and started to test our program with real runners—fast, slow, male, female, young, old, novice, and veteran. For the next three years, scores of runners came to Greenville for fitness testing but did the program on their own. We also wanted to find out if the program would work in the real world where runners would have to find a track, measure courses for tempo and long runs, and hold specific paces for key workouts. Over 16 weeks of training, 100 percent of the runners improved their fitness and 70 percent ran a personal best marathon. (See “The Less-Is-More Marathon Plan,” RW, August 2005.)

Over the past two years, more than 1,000 runners have written to FIRST, many of them reporting on how much time they’ve shaved off their personal records. We’ve heard from all types of runners, from five-hour and sub-three-hour marathoners to those preparing for their

first 5-K. Their comments, however, haven't been limited to performance: "I'm 37 with two kids and a busy profession; your program fits my life," "I never felt worn out," and "I didn't experience a hint of injury." That's because three days of focused running combined with cross-training limits overtraining and burnout, and substantially cuts the risk of injury. It's also efficient and flexible, allowing runners to meet their goals without sacrificing job, health, family, and friends. It can help you, too, whether you want to race your best 5-K or 10-K, half or full marathon, or simply become a fitter, stronger runner.

The Power of Three

Many runners' conversations begin with "How many runs did you do this week?" and "How many miles did you run?" These questions neglect the importance of intensity—the pace of each workout. The FIRST plan, however, favors intensity over frequency, quality over quantity, fast running over the accumulation of mileage. Why? Because the higher the intensity, the greater the return.

For PR-chasing runners, this translates into the training principle of specificity:

If you want to run fast, you have to train fast. But if speed isn't your goal, hard workouts still matter because the benefits of moderate-intensity exercise are magnified with higher-intensity workouts. Your caloric expenditure is greater, which contributes to weight control, and your body's ability to utilize fat increases, which translates into greater endurance. Plus, the single best predictor of longevity is maximal aerobic capacity; and the single best way to improve your aerobic capacity is to train with intensity.

FIRST tailors its intensity to runners with three weekly runs—track repeats, tempo, and the long run. Together they improve the primary predictors of running performance: VO₂ max, lactate metabolism, and running economy. That is, speed, the ability to sustain speed, and endurance.

All three workouts improve these variables, but each targets some better than others. Intervals improve speed by increasing VO₂ max (the body's ability to produce energy using oxygen), and running economy (the amount of oxygen being consumed at a given speed). Tempo runs, also called lactate-threshold (LT) workouts, teach your body to run faster

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THE FIRST TRAINING WEEK

Day 1	Day 2	Day 3	Day 4	Day 5	Day 6	Day 7
Cross-train	Key Run #1 Speed Repeats	Cross-train	Key Run #2 Tempo	Off	Key Run #3 Long Run	Off

» **CROSS-TRAIN** 30 to 60 minutes at a moderate to hard effort (a noticeable increase in breathing, or a 3 on a 1-to-5 perceived-exertion scale). You can do short, intense workouts with periods of rest, hard 20- to 25-minute efforts, or hour-plus moderate-intensity sessions.

» **SPEED OR TRACK REPEATS** One- to two-mile warmup; 4 to 8 x 800 (or various combinations of 400, 800, 1200 repeats) at 5-K pace; one- to two-mile cooldown

» **TEMPO RUN** One- to two-mile warmup; three to five miles at 5-K pace plus 40 to 50 seconds per mile or slightly slower; one- to two-mile cooldown

» **LONG RUN** Six to 20 miles (depending on your goals) at 5-K pace plus 75 to 90 seconds

PERFECT PACE The speed of the running workouts is based on your 5-K time. If you haven't run a 5-K recently, you can determine your time on a 400-meter track or a mile course. After a 10-minute warmup, run three separate miles with a minute walking recovery; try to run the fastest time that you can maintain for all three miles. Average the three times and add 15 seconds to determine your 5-K race pace. Example: Say your times were 9:08, 9:12 and 9:16. The average is 9:12. Add 15 seconds for a 9:27 mile, for a 29:21 5-K finish time.

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