

## Run less. Run faster? For marathon training, less can be more, experts say

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It sounds a little too good to be true: Finish a 26.2-mile marathon on just three days of training a week.

But for time-pressed, injury-prone runners, this type of low-mileage marathon plan can be an attractive alternative to the traditional five- or six-day training programs. Why neglect your job, family and friends while pounding out more than 50 miles a week if you don't have to?

For many runners, finding the right regimen is a precarious balancing act. Too little training can leave you painfully unprepared. But as your mileage increases, so does your mental fatigue, physical exhaustion and the risk of an overuse injury.



Marathon-lite plans usually involve two short but purposeful runs -- a speed workout and paced run -- during the week and a longer one on the weekend. Cross training (swimming, strength training or cycling) can be incorporated, but isn't necessary. Junk miles are eliminated.

"The single best way to stay injury-free is to run every other day," said former Olympian Jeff Galloway, who created a popular three-day program that incorporates frequent "walk breaks." "Three days gives you all the ingredients you need, plus rest and recovery."

It worked for Susan Freeman, 40, of Naperville, who found herself feeling burned out by the end of her training season on five- and six-day plans. "It seemed like I was always running 5 or 7 miles," she said.

Now she finds herself looking forward to workouts because they're more focused. "Each individual workout is a lot tougher, but it's doable, since I don't have to go out and run the next day," said Freeman, a group fitness instructor and environmental engineer.

But can this less-is-more plan make you faster? Freeman improved her best time by 13 minutes, to 3 hours and 43 minutes. And though much depends on the quality of your workouts, researchers with the Furman Institute of Running and Scientific Training (FIRST) have shown that experienced runners can improve their times using three runs a week.

"Faster," meanwhile, is a relative term. Mark Buciak recently completed his 30th consecutive Boston Marathon, running an average of 30 miles on just three days a week because after completing 52 marathons, he thought it was time to change things up. His time of 3:46 was far from his personal record of 2:30, but it was 23 minutes faster than last year and his fastest time since having heart surgery in 2006. "I consider it one of the best performances of my life," said Buciak, 48, the program director for the Road to Boston training and running camps.

Other coaches and runners are skeptical. The marathon is not simply a grueling cardiovascular activity; it's a strength event, maintains Sean Coster, coach of the Nike Bowerman Athletic Club. "A marathoner needs to develop the strength to bounce down that road for 26.2 miles, and that comes with regular running," he said.

Chicago running coach Bill Leach says the plans are popular with those who want to run a marathon without working very hard. "It's somewhat individual, but progress begins to occur at four days a week," said Leach, who runs marathon training programs for the Chicago Area Runners Association. "If you're training three days, you may not be going backward, but you're probably just treading water."

That makes sense to Flossmoor's Rob Held, a lawyer who says his life consists of working, sleeping and running. He's training to race -- not run -- the 2009 New York City Marathon by putting in six days of running a week, an average of 85 weekly miles.

"I believe I can train my body to run faster, my pulmonary system to work more efficiently and my mind to accept the work (pain?) associated with running at or near my body's ultimate potential," he wrote in an e-mail. "And I think that high mileage is one component of that effort."

There's also no guarantee that you won't get injured on three-day plans. Podiatrist Roland Tolliver, 51, of Freeport used the FIRST program to train for his first marathon to reduce the impact on his body. Everything was going smoothly until 12 days before the race, when he developed a sacral stress fracture in his lower spine. Though he doesn't blame the program (he twisted his back at his son's Communion), a speed workout might have exacerbated the injury, he said. What most coaches agree on is that the best way to get injured is to do too much too soon. Listen to your body and remember that it's constantly changing. "The important thing is to have a plan and a program," said Bart Yasso, of Runner's World. "The worst thing you can do is to enter a marathon and run when you can. Those are the people who run into trouble."

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