

# Running Safely Into Middle Age

Age is the enemy of serious runners. But you can keep the zip in your pace without excessively straining your body—or your schedule. **BY PETER COY**

**L**IKE OTHER OLDER, OVERCOMMITTED but still competitive runners, I'm no longer trying to set personal bests. Those days are gone with President Reagan and the Bee Gees. My goal instead is to race as fast as I can, take as little time for training as possible, and still not get injured. Those of us who achieve this elusive balance will enjoy a small miracle. While our finishing times get slower and slower, we get closer and closer to the front of our age group. In running, at least, the greatest triumph is to decay at a slower rate than our peers.

My recommendation for most busy, injury-prone, type A runners is to emphasize quality of training over quantity. This conclusion comes after consulting with experts and fellow runners and going by my own 35 years of experience as a competitive runner. (For what it's worth, I ran a half-marathon last month at age 49 in 1 hour, 23 minutes.)

What's wrong with quantity? Because running, say, three tough workouts a week and resting or going easy on other days will give you better results, in less time and more safely, than slogging through lots of mileage at a mediocre pace. Cutting back on mileage will also free up time for the strengthening and stretching exercises you know you need but have been ignoring. True, high-quality workouts are a strain on the body—by design,

they break down muscle fibers so they rebuild themselves stronger. But done right, such programs aren't much riskier than the ultracautious approach of going both short and slow.

A new book that takes this position is *Runner's World: Run Less, Run Faster* by Bill Pierce, Scott Murr, and Ray Moss, a team of health and exercise experts at Furman University in South Carolina. The Furman program involves only three days of running per week, plus two or three days of cross-training. Even marathoners in the program do just 35 miles in their longest week.

Sound wimpy? It isn't. Each running session is intense. There is a speed day with roughly 5 kilometers' worth of intervals on the track (for example, 10 fast laps with short rests in between), a run at a tempo just slightly slower than your 5K



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race pace, and a long run at a healthy clip. The twice-or-thrice-a-week cross-training, such as swimming or biking, is supposed to be done hard, too, so you get a genuine cardiovascular and muscular workout while giving your legs a chance to recover from the pounding. "I'm fresher with this," says Howard Nevins, 52, an experienced marathoner who set a near-personal-best of 3 hours, 20 minutes at the Long Beach Marathon in 2005, his first time on the Furman program. Nevins, president of Marathon Financial, a small-business lender in Woodland Hills, Calif., says he appreciates the compactness of the program because he works 10-hour days and has three children at home. Plus, he says, "my gut feeling is, I think I'm faster."

## INTENSITY, NOT MILEAGE

A sample week from Furman's 12-week training regimen for a 5-kilometer race\*

<b>SUNDAY</b>	45 minutes on stationary bike.
<b>MONDAY</b>	Ten 400-meter runs at 40 seconds per mile faster than your 5K race pace. Ninety seconds of rest after each.
<b>TUESDAY</b>	30 minutes of kicking in the pool.
<b>WEDNESDAY</b>	One-mile jog; four miles at 30 seconds slower than 5K pace; one-mile jog.
<b>THURSDAY</b>	Rest.
<b>FRIDAY</b>	Eight miles at 45 seconds slower than 5K pace.
<b>SATURDAY</b>	50 minutes on spinning bike (optional).

\*Furman also prescribes warmups, cooldowns, and stretching and strengthening exercises  
Data: *Runner's World: Run Less, Run Faster*

If you line up exercise regimens in terms of their stress on the body, Furman is roughly in the middle. The approach espoused by Jeff Galloway, a former

Olympian, occupies the ultrasafe end of the spectrum. Like Furman's, his acolytes run just three times a week. But Galloway controversially recommends taking walk breaks, not only during training, but in races as well. He says walking rejuvenates the legs so you can finish strong and beat people who don't take breaks. "The intensity [of the Furman approach] is too great for most of today's runners," Galloway says in an e-mail.

Robert Kraftowitz, a West Mifflin (Pa.) physician who turns 56 this month, swears by Galloway. He walked for 25 seconds every four minutes in the Boston Marathon in April and still managed to pass loads of people, finishing in 3 hours, 40 minutes.

## TROPHY GRABBERS

OF COURSE, SOME serious working adults somehow manage to do heavy mileage at high quality and not break down. Those are the ones up there on the stage grabbing the trophies while you clutch your finisher's medal. "The best training is consistent training," says Joseph McVeigh, who managed to run a blazing 2 hours, 27 minutes in the New York City Marathon last fall at age 43 despite holding a real job at a big New York financial-services firm.

Even older runners can thrive on enormous amounts of mileage if they build up to it gradually, says Kevin Beck, a coach for DistanceCoach.com. Pete Pfitzinger, the two-time U.S. Olympic marathoner and exercise physiologist who operates DistanceCoach.com out of his home in New Zealand, says in an e-mail that Furman's low-mileage approach sounds overly risk-averse for most runners. "I would only recommend it to those runners who have a history of injury when running more than [Furman] recommends," he says. Furman's Pierce disputes that but agrees that runners who manage to avoid injury could "most likely" run faster by running more miles.

Whether you fall in with Galloway, Furman, Pfitzinger, or some other training program, you'll have to confront some hard truths: You don't get fast by running slowly. You can't run at all if you get injured. And you can't do a 90-minute run if all you have to spare is 45.

For me, at least, the best compromise is fewer running workouts but better ones: zippy, hard-charging miles that make me feel like a sprinter, not a slogger. That gets me home sooner, with my sadly aging human infrastructure intact to run another day. ■

