

How to Pick a Running Race

You've got some (or many) running miles in your training log. Now you're ready to test your speed and fitness on the race course. Here are 5 Questions to ask yourself when choosing your next running race:

#1) How much have you been running?

There is no magic number which tells you how many training miles you need to be logging to run a certain race. But longer races require more training miles, so the first place to look when considering what race to target is how many miles you've logged weekly for the past 6-8 weeks. As a general rule of thumb, your longest runs need to be close to the length of the race you plan to run. (The longer the race, the more of a gap there can be. For example, a runner preparing for a marathon max out at a 23 mile training run before actually racing their marathon.)

#2) How long do you have to prepare?

Next, you'll need to consider your timeline. Maybe you know you want to run a race in August, but it's July and your weekly mileage is averaging 20 miles. It's probably not realistic to try to run a half marathon next month. However, a 5k is well within reach.

Likewise, if you know you want to run a certain distance, pick a race that is far enough in the future to give yourself adequate training time. Again, there are no magic numbers. But there is a formula you can use to determine how quickly you can increase your mileage without significantly increasing your risk of injury. Let's walk through it:

The Acute to Chronic Ratio

This formula averages your last four weeks of mileage, and compares this week's total to the average. The result is the acute-to-chronic ratio.

Week 1: 40 miles + Week 2: 45 miles + Week 3: 50 miles + Week 4 (This Week): 55 miles = 190 miles
190 miles / 4 weeks = 47.5
This week (Week 4): 55 miles / Weekly Average: 47.5 = 1.158

The acute-to-chronic ratio in this scenario is approximately 1.158. A ratio between 1 and 1.2 is ideal for avoiding injury.

So if you want to run a half marathon, and in preparation you want to increase your mileage to between 50 and 60 miles per week, consider Question #1 and Question #2, then pick a race date accordingly.

#3) Have you been doing intensity?

If you are planning to race at a higher intensity than a normal training run, you will need to prepare with some intensity (intervals.) Interval workouts increase the overall training load of the workout and can lead to overtraining and injury when not planned properly.

You will want your intensity workouts to match the race you're doing. Intervals done at marathon pace will not help you run your best 5k, for example. That said, any good training plan includes interval workouts with a variety of paces and structures.

If you have been doing intensity regularly (at least once per 10 days) for the past 6 weeks, you are probably ready to jump into race-specific intensity sessions. If you have not been doing regular intensity, you will need a little longer to prepare for your race, as your first couple weeks of intensity should be easier and less specific.

#4 Road or trail?

Now we're getting into the fun questions. You're ready to go with your chosen race distance, and you have adequate time to prepare and get some good intensity sessions under your belt. Now we get to find out what kind of a runner you really are! Do you want to pound it out on the roads, or get muddy and scraped up on the trails?

That's an exaggeration. But seriously, this is a fun question! What sounds like a fun race to you? It's important to know whether you'll be racing on roads or trails because you want your primary training surface to match that which you'll be racing on. The implication of this decision extend beyond just training grounds. You'll also want to make sure you have a shoe that fits both your foot and the demands of the terrain. Will the race be supported? It can take a lot longer to run a given distance on a trail than on roads, so you will want to be prepared with food or water if there are no aid stations.

#5) Who/what/when/where/why?

The motivation questions! Do you want to run with friends? Consider what kind of crowd you'd like to be a part of on race day. What sort of races do your favorite types of runners gravitate to, and when are they? Is there a particular course that looks enjoyable or inspiring? Maybe you want to travel a long distance for your race, and make it a vacation. Maybe you want a neighborhood fun run. Does the race support a cause you feel strongly about? Does it involve fundraising?

Now that you have your race picked out and are ready to start your training, you just need a good training plan! Download your free Training Schedule and Log template, as well as an example of how to use it effectively. If you have questions about your training plan, contact me using the form on the website. And if you're ready to work one-on-one with me, and get your own custom-designed training plan, check out Coaching Options.