

Masters' Training for Distance Runners

– A view from two runners with a few miles in the legs –

Introduction

There's probably two types of Masters in the club. The first is the smaller group of runners who were involved in the sport as Juniors or Seniors and have kept up their interest (or are making a comeback). The second type is the "new" runner, although they might have a few years behind them now.

The first type of Master doesn't need a lot of advice – they probably know their body and what training works well for them. So, this article is mainly aimed at the second group in the hope that some of the things we have learnt along the way (both right and wrong) might help.

The great thing about not having a background in Senior running is that you can improve your running and deliver PBs over a number of years without looking over your shoulder at what 'used to be'. You have joined a club and you want to get better. Knowing this is achievable should be a great motivator. At its core, getting better at running is a simple process. In the words of a running Haiku:

Run a lot of miles
Sometimes, run a bit faster
Rest once in a while

In other words, Consistency, Speed Work, and Recovery. The same training logic that applies to Seniors also applies to Masters. Peter McDermott has written extensively in "Coaches Corner" explaining all of this and it is not our intention to repeat his work. Our goal is to take these building blocks and look at how they work in the context of a Masters athlete.



Masters of the game: Declan Power (833), Philip O'Doherty (835) and fellow Harriers

Attitudes and Habits

Many of the masters in the club had little background in the sport when they joined but did so in order to improve their times or competitiveness. In our view there are a few non-training steps that can be taken to make it more likely that this will happen:

- Run with others whenever possible, particularly for the hard runs like sessions and long distance training. This isn't always possible but one of the benefits of club membership is the structured approach to sessions and the chance to make running friends with similar pacing targets (at least, in a non-Covid world).
- You don't know how good you can be – don't be afraid to find out. Use club races or Parkruns to push yourself. Aim to pace off someone better than you and go as far as you can. Don't be afraid to blow up, it's a learning exercise. Masters with no background in senior running have no benchmarks to succeed or fail against and it can be easy to settle for a 'good' or comfortable performance level that may not reflect your true ability.



Keepin' it country! Clonliffe Ladies Masters Team

- In a similar vein, you may not know your best distance. It may be that you see the marathon as your goal or a 10k. However, why not find out if you're really an ageing Usain Bolt or Mark English?
- Aim to be competitive and take your place as part of Clonliffe teams competing in Masters (and other events). Over the course of a year, there are Cross Country, Road Relays, indoor and Outdoor championships as well as all the road race championships from 5k to marathon. These can be at a Dublin, Leinster or national level. There's also European and World events. Masters competitors are a very friendly bunch so there's great camaraderie across the clubs. One note of caution - as we age, it's important to be careful not to over-race. We will talk about this a bit later in the article.

- Make your training into a 'habit'. Work at being consistent as to what time of day you train at and what your weekly pattern of training looks like. If you have limited time on a particular day, try to do a shorter run, even as little as 15 minutes. It helps keep the habit in place. For masters, it gets increasingly harder to get back to a good level after time off, compared with younger runners.
- Remember, it's a hobby. Don't beat yourself up if you're forced to miss a run or you had one or two glasses of wine too many the night before.

Optimising training as you age – Speedwork and Recovery

- There is no getting around it. The capabilities of our heart, lungs and muscles decline with age and increasingly limit athletic performance. However, with smart training, we can slow down the slow-down, in effect reducing the rate of aging of the body and still perform strongly in competition or against the clock.
- The key is to maintain the quality training work, while ensuring adequate recovery by keeping the hard days hard and the easy days increasingly easier. With age, the fast-twitch muscle fibres decrease, muscle length shortens, and motor nerve cells deteriorate. Maintaining speed training at least once, and, possibly, twice per week (for the younger master) can delay this process. For older masters, consider adopting a 10-day training cycle, getting two quality sessions in over a ten-day period.
- Research has shown that Tempo or Lactate threshold runs are particularly beneficial for masters athletes, so it's good to incorporate these in a long-distance training program. Consider making one of your quality days a Tempo run and the other a track session.
- As we age, it can become more difficult to handle high volumes or reps in training sessions while maintaining consistent performance in each of the reps. One useful way to counter this is to structure a session into sets. For example, instead of doing 12x400 in a row, do three sets of 4x400 or 2 sets of 6x400 with a longer recovery between sets.
- Additionally, it's more important as we get older to ease back on the days after hard training and resist the temptation to put in back-to-back hard days even though you feel good and often did it often in the past (when you could get away with it!). If necessary, increase the recovery time by another 12 hours or a full day if your body is still stiff and sore. It may not be sensible to take on a Tuesday and Thursday session, even though these are the club days – consider a Tuesday and Friday routine in order to get more recovery time. This can be an opportunity to work on flexibility, or perform non-weight bearing activity like cycling or swimming (slowly).
- Improper recovery usually results in injury or over-exhaustion, which can creep up over time. We would say that nowadays our hard days are very hard, but no more than twice a week and are structured around adequate recovery, flexibility and conditioning. Most of the easy days involve running on softer surfaces like grass or cycling.
- The trick is to train smarter and adjust training to handle the workload, while avoiding burn-out or injury. For distance-running, this will involve reducing mileage but maintaining the same time spent running. For example, the time and energy required to run X amount of miles per week in your 50's may have been enough to run X + 20% in your 30's.

Strength-training and Pre-conditioning

As runners age, there is a growing reduction in stride length, and hence more ground contact time and less power. However, the stride rate can be maintained through optimal lactate threshold training and long runs. Muscle mass, flexibility and growth hormone production decline as the years go by, but these can be countered by:

- Weight training: reps of multiple-joint exercises, e.g. leg presses, lunges, squats
- Sprint drills: typically, reps of between 50 to 100m on flat or hills.
- Plyometrics: Single and double leg lateral jumps, line bounces

These serve to strengthen running muscles, ligaments and tendons, which make them more resilient to injury. In each case, especially if you have not incorporated them in your training before or for a long time, progression should be done slowly starting with a lower number of reps and emphasising quality over quantity. Above all, we advise to consult the advice of an experienced training professional before adopting a strength program.

It's not necessary to perform all the above in a typical training week. We would recommend focusing on weight training more in the earlier phase of a total training cycle of say 12 or more weeks, and then introduce sprint drills after a few weeks and plyometrics later in the cycle. The latter can be very intense and should really only be performed when the body is well conditioned and not too soon after a hard training day when there is general muscular fatigue.

Aside from the above, regular pre-conditioning exercises, even for just 15 mins at a given time can be beneficial and prepare the body for hard running sessions, by helping to maintain stride rate and agility. Such exercises include:

- Leg extensions
- Calf raises
- Squats (single & double leg)
- Standing leg cycle
- Single leg balancing

Maintaining flexibility and suppleness becomes increasingly important with age. It doesn't have to mean hours and lots of euros spent on sports massage and physical therapy sessions. Regular static stretching and foam rolling of key muscle groups and tendons, particularly in the hours and day after a hard training session, can aid recovery and maintain flexibility.

Racing and Periodization

This can be a tricky one, because some of us just love to race! Some people “race” their local Park Run every week. That’s fine, as long as one accepts that it’s not realistic to hit peak performance more or less every week, like when we were younger. It reminds us of a quote from then-Arsenal manager George Graham when commenting on the difficulties of a congested fixture calendar, when he lamented that “*it’s hard to be passionate more than once a week*” (-: Maybe he was referring to something else, but you get the drift.

- Our advice to masters athletes would be not to over-race. As with hard training, we don’t recover as quickly from races either. Particularly from long-distance efforts ranging from 10K to Marathon. This may require an adjustment of attitude for someone who is used to racing every week or two and depends what level of performance you wish to achieve.
- Many of us may set a big goal race, the Dublin City Marathon for example. As we age, we should accept that it becomes more necessary to build more slowly to a peak as more recovery time is required and resist the temptation to over-race in the build-up in order to allow for that recovery. It’s a fine balance, and largely depends on what the personal goal is.
- **Declan:** I would seek a peak performance effort in a goal race. If it is, say, a half-marathon race, then I will work backwards to plan a training program of typically 12-14 weeks and plan two and no more than three preparation races in that cycle. If I have made such a plan, then it helps me to focus and resist the runner’s urge to jump into more races and risk burn-out or injury.
- **Philip:** I structure my year around Championship racing – National Masters track Outdoor and Indoor or, in some years, a World or European half-marathon championship. I would race a bit more than Declan but, for the non-target races, won’t completely taper and will use the race as a test of where I am.
- As we age, we need to be honest with ourselves and set reasonable goals for our target events or races. Particularly those masters who have been competing since their youth, it’s necessary to accept the inevitable that the times will not be as quick in our fifties as they were 10 and more years ago (leaving the matter of modern-day super-shoes aside!). Set new targets and enjoy the process of striving to achieve or surpass them. Long may you run!

Further References

Athletics Ireland Webinar: Athlete Mobility and Injury Prevention

- Ciara McCallion (Clonliffe Harriers)

https://www.athleticsireland.ie/downloads/other/AAi_Coach_Injury_Prevention.pdf

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v-J977MFD0o>

Strength Training for Runners: Avoid Injury and Boost Performance – John Shepherd

Refer to the specific chapter on Masters strength-training

Irish Masters Athletics website

<https://www.irishmasterathletics.com>

British Masters Athletics Federation - Resources

<http://bmaf.org.uk/health-well-being>

<http://bmaf.org.uk/performance-improvement>

Refer to 'Ten Athletic Performance Facts For The Master Athlete'



World & European Masters Champion: Clonliffe's Snezana Bechtina