

[COACH CULPEPPER]

FIND YOUR TEMPO

Increase your aerobic gains by adding tempo runs to your training.

BY ALAN CULPEPPER

RUNNING ENTHUSIASTS often love to throw around the term “tempo run.” Yet I’ve found in working with all levels of athletes that many are often confused about what tempo runs really are—and where they fit into your training. Tempo runs are one of the best ways to improve your aerobic conditioning, but they are often overemphasized in a training program or inadvertently performed at the wrong effort level. These workouts, which benefit 5K runners, ultramarathoners and everyone in between, are an essential part of an effective training regimen. The problem? Many runners believe there’s always room for another tempo run, and thus neglect other training necessities.

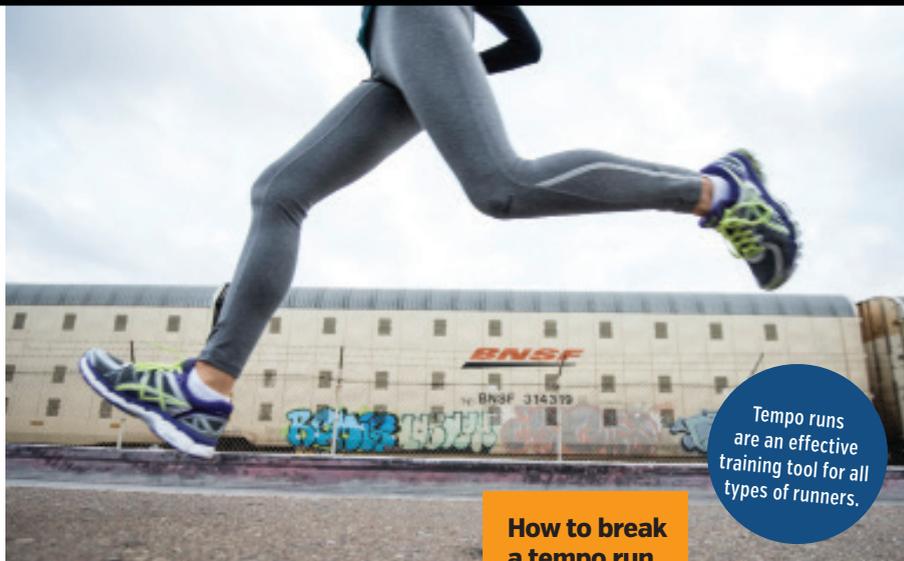
Let’s take a closer look at tempo runs: what they are and how best to include them in your training.

WHAT IS “TEMPO”?

Tempo [or threshold] runs are efforts that are performed right at your aerobic threshold, or just below the point where your body produces lactic acid due to a lack of oxygen being delivered to working muscles. These workouts fall within 80–85 percent of max heart rate, about half-marathon effort or pace. Tempo effort is noticeably more challenging than an easy run but also not so hard that you can’t maintain the pacing consistently. You shouldn’t be able to carry on a conversation during a tempo run—but you also shouldn’t be so out of breath that even one-word answers are tough.

HOW DO THEY FIT INTO YOUR TRAINING SCHEDULE?

Tempo runs have their place in a training schedule along with the total number of weekly miles, long runs, long intervals and speed workouts. Too often, athletes will do a tempo run because they’re



Tempo runs are an effective training tool for all types of runners.

How to break a tempo run into smaller segments:

– 3 x 10:00 at half-marathon to marathon pace with 2:30 rest between intervals

– 4 x 8:00 at half-marathon pace with 2:00 rest between intervals

– 2 x 20:00 at half-marathon to marathon pace with 3:30 rest between intervals

– 2 x 3 miles at half-marathon pace with 4:00 rest between intervals

easy to execute, there are no intervals involved and you don’t need a track or a hill. It’s important to recognize that all the above training elements have their place in a program. If you neglect any of them, tempo runs will only have limited benefits. For example, if you don’t do speed work, your body will not be able to adapt to a faster turnover, which ultimately translates to quicker tempo pace. Similarly, if you don’t include long interval workouts—where your body is over your threshold and producing lactic acid—you won’t be as fit as you would be otherwise, and thus a tempo run will only offer moderate fitness gains.

HOW LONG SHOULD THEY BE, AND HOW OFTEN SHOULD I DO THEM?

Running your tempos too hard or too easy defeats the purpose of the workout. If you are running under 6 miles for the workout, maintaining half-marathon pace or effort is just about right; for longer tempo runs between 6 to 10 miles, marathon effort/pace (or 75–80 percent of max heart rate) is more accurate.

If you are new to structured training, a 6-mile tempo run is much too long, but it’s something to work toward over several months. Breaking up the workout into smaller segments is a good way to mix up the pacing while still maintaining threshold effort [see sidebar].

When training for a marathon, tempo runs longer than six miles are necessary. They should not replace your long run or

be so long that your recovery (and subsequently, your marathon performance) is compromised. A good range is 6–10 miles for longer tempo runs. For experienced runners, the workout doesn’t need to be broken up into smaller segments, since the pacing should be more controlled and closer to marathon goal pace. Remember to warm up and cool down with a mile or two of easy running before and after the tempo run.

Tempo runs should be performed about once every 10 days. They’re a good workout to start

with when coming off a break or easing back into training after illness or injury since they engage your aerobic system without overly taxing your muscles or tendons like speed work or hill repeats.



► Running coach and two-time U.S. Olympian **ALAN CULPEPPER** is a vice president at Competitor Group Inc. and a race director for the Rock ‘n’ Roll Marathon Series.