



▶ Nothing will prepare you for racing or give an accurate fitness indicator as much as a tune-up race.

## GET TUNED UP

How intermediary races can help you reach your target race goals.

BY ALAN CULPEPPER

**F**ollowing a sensible training plan is the most effective way to reach your ultimate racing goals. But part of that plan might call for the need to race in a shorter race to tune up your fitness and competitive juices.

When planning for a significant goal race such as a half-marathon or marathon, incorporating tune-up races three to eight weeks before your big day can keep training fresh, provide a fitness indicator, offer increased training gains and let you try out race-day strategies and gear.

But before you sign up for additional races, there are some caveats to consider. It's easy to underestimate the ben-

efits of tune-up races or place too much focus on smaller events, thus minimizing potential gains. The key is understanding how a tune-up race fits into your comprehensive training plan and overall goals.

### BENEFITS

**1** | When it comes to fitness gains, there is no substitute for a hard race effort. The intensity, adrenaline rush and competitive aspects of a race can allow you to push beyond your normal comfort zone, which translates to a higher level of overall fitness. It can be difficult (and counterproductive) to simulate a race experience in a training session, even if in a time-trial. Adding races to your schedule is a more effective approach to training than forcing workouts to be harder than appropriate.

**2** | Tune-up races help you practice race-day execution for your goal event, the big race for which you're

ultimately training. Having a few trial run races to practice race-day routines, test out shoes, socks, clothes and accessories, practice pre-race and race-day nutrition and tinker with goal pacing are all invaluable. These elements are often underestimated when toeing the line for the larger goal, but, in fact, honing these small factors will contribute to your confidence and often make the biggest difference between race-day execution going poorly, average or really well.

**3** | Tune-up events are a great way to gauge fitness and preparedness. The good, hard effort of a tune-up race will help expose areas in your training that have room for improvement. That might include your comfort level at a certain speed, your ability to maintain your effort on hills, your consistency of holding pace or your ability to finish strong the last 25 percent of the race.

Some of my greatest learnings >>

**DID YOU KNOW?** "The Spirit of the Marathon II," the sequel to the 2007 award-winning documentary film directed by Jon Dunham, will be shown in movie theatres across the U.S. for one night only on June 12. Go to [www.fathomevents.com](http://www.fathomevents.com) for details.



*The good, hard effort of a tune-up race will help expose areas in your training that have room for improvement.*

>> came while running a tune-up race a few months before my primary racing goal. I was able to see where I was lacking and still had time to make the necessary adjustments. If you are paying close attention to how you feel in your tune-up race, you will learn what aspect does not feel quite right, or confirm that you are on the right target. For example, you might realize you need more long runs to add to your aerobic base. Or you might sense you lack quick leg turnover and need to work on speed and drills.

### CAUTIONS

**1** | Don't make tune-up races an afterthought. Plan ahead, look at your training calendar and add events that work with your overall plan. Be careful not to just pop races in here or there,

but instead consider where a down week would fit nicely or how a race compares to the number of weeks out from your goal. Beware of having too many race efforts in a given period or you may put yourself at risk of injury or fatigue.

**2** | More is not always better. Having too many secondary races will lead to a lack of proper training and continual compromise. Racing should be one of the many aspects included in a training plan, but it should not take the place of the actual training, bigger mileage weeks and weeks with several hard workouts and a longer run. Too many races will cause your overall fitness to level out, leaving you stale and unable to achieve the proper physical and psychological peak.

**3** | Race shorter. The distance of your tune-up races should complement the training you are already doing, not confuse it. For example, if you are preparing for a 10K, then running a few 5Ks within the last six weeks leading up to your goal would be appropriate. A hard half-marathon thrown into the mix wouldn't be a wise choice and could actually be counter-productive, unless perhaps you were planning to run only a portion of that race at race pace. Generally, consider racing half the distance or less of your goal race, but not within two to three weeks of your goal race.



Two-time U.S. Olympian Alan Culpepper helps runners of all abilities via his website at [www.culpeppercoaching.com](http://www.culpeppercoaching.com).

**TRAINING TIP:** Practice the same hydration and nutrition strategy on long training runs that you're planning to use in a race.