

## HIT THE TRACK

Building your speed is just one of the many benefits of running around the oval.

BY ALAN CULPEPPER

**W**hen it comes to running, the track is most often associated

with speed. And if you use it wisely, the speed you build can help you set new PRs, run down your competitors and perform workouts with more precision. But if you try to run too hard or run on the track too often, it could put a big dent in your training or lead to unnecessary soreness and even injury.

So why would runners take those risks? Whether you're preparing to run a faster mile or your first marathon, there are huge benefits to including track sessions in your training program. Here are some simple and effective ways to implement those kinds of workouts and realize some great benefits.

### TANGIBLE BENEFITS

**1 | Improve Efficiency.** The soft, perfectly level and responsive surface of the track allows for increased efficiency as it relates to footstrike, stride length and toe-off. This is also achieved through the inclusion of shorter, quicker intervals or intervals faster than goal race pace. Including sub-race pace workouts on the track will help increase your efficiency at your intended race pace no matter what surface you will be racing on. Even if you are preparing for a road race, improving your efficiency is critical and performing workouts on the track helps with this process.

**2 | Understand Effort.** Even with all the amazing advancements in GPS technology, the track remains the optimal way to monitor and improve your perception of effort during a workout. Having the ability to check splits every lap (or half lap)

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and gauge your effort will allow you to adjust your pacing accordingly during workouts. The goal of workouts is not just to run as hard as you can but rather learn how to run at different intensities for various lengths of time. Knowing exactly how far you have to go for each interval allows for a quicker adaptation to the learned skill of perceived effort. You can also practice race pace on the track to really dial in your effort for race day and learn how to settle into the pacing.

**3 | Monitor Progression.** By adding track workouts to your training schedule, you can duplicate the same sessions about two times a month and see how your fitness and sense of pace are progressing. Even if you duplicate workouts on the road it is difficult to make true comparisons from workout to workout. The track is quantifiable and impartial; you can't fake your way through a workout on the track. If your fitness has improved, you will know it by the times you hit for the intervals. Another great way to compare workouts is to run a tempo

run on the track by heart rate. For example, if you run a 3-mile tempo run at a precise heart rate, you can run the same workout at the same heart rate several weeks later but, hopefully, run it at a much faster pace.

**4 | Improve Concentration.** This may seem counterintuitive, but the mundane quality of the track causes an increase in focus and improves concentration. Practicing concentration in workouts allows for better application on race day.

### HIT THE TRACK SENSIBLY

**1 | Take your time.** As with any new training element, track workouts must be introduced slowly into the training schedule. Getting on the track for one workout a week is a good starting point and even after you gain experience no more than twice a week is needed. Due to the repetitive nature of running around an oval on a flat surface, too many workouts can prove detrimental, most commonly through strained calf or hamstring muscles. >>

**CONSIDER THIS:** WARM UP AND COOL DOWN IN YOUR EVERYDAY TRAINERS, BUT WEAR LIGHT RACING FLATS FOR TRACK WORKOUTS.

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>> Always precede a track workout with a good warm-up followed by dynamic drills and always cool down and add static stretching when you're finished.

**2 | Be Careful.** There is a tendency when running on the track to run fast.

Many runners assume all track workouts include only really fast running, but that's not the case. The keys to effective track workouts include controlled efforts, smart pacing and paying close attention to how you feel. Relative speed is important, but it should not be the sole focus of all track sessions. Avoid all-out sprinting or even dramatically picking up the pace to finish a rep in a specific time.

**INTRODUCTORY WORKOUTS**

Shorter intervals should be sprinkled into your training program, but perhaps not as often as you might think. Speed work with intervals under 600 meters (1½ laps of a 400-meter track) are really only needed about once every two weeks in most instances. Here are a few workouts that can be plugged in once every two weeks or so. (Note: Having the guidance of a coach is the best way to implement track sessions.)

▶ **6 x 400 meters at your current 10K race fitness with a 200-meter easy jog between reps.**

This workout helps you develop a sense of pace and race rhythm. If you're a 40-minute 10K runner, it means you'll be doing each lap in 1:37 (roughly 6:28 mile pace). For a 50-minute 10K runner, the pace is 2:01 per lap (8:04 per mile).

▶ **4 x 1-mile at half-marathon race pace with a one lap easy jog recovery between reps.**

This workout is aimed at improving your aerobic endurance and helps you improve your sense of pace. If you're in 1:30 half-marathon shape, you'll be aiming for 6:52 miles, or 1 minute, 43 seconds per lap. If you're a 1:45 half-marathoner, that means you'll be shooting for 8:01 miles, or 2 minutes per lap.

▶ **3 x [600 meters, 400 meters, 200 meters] with a one-lap easy jog in between reps.**

This workout gets progressively faster with each set and helps you work on running faster when your legs are fatigued. Each of the reps should be run at the same effort, but each 600-400-200 set should get progressively faster with each set. Start at your 10K race pace for the first set and finish at your 5K race pace. If you're a 40-minute 10K runner/19-minute 5K runner, that means you'll run the first set in 2:23 (600), 1:37 (400) and 48 seconds (200) and progress to 2:17, 1:32 and 0:45 by the last set. For a 50-minute 10K runner/23-minute 5K runner, the times would start at 3:02, 2:01, 1:00 and progress to 2:48, 1:52, 0:56 by the last set.

▶ **Tempo runs between 3 and 6 miles.**

After warming up for 2 miles, run a specific distance at half-marathon or marathon race pace. The track is a great place to practice controlled efforts and learn how properly pace a 10K, half-marathon or even marathon. When I was preparing for a marathon, I would often include a 5- or 6-mile tempo run on the track every several weeks to practice race pace for the marathon.

**RECOVERY**

The other component to an effective track workout is the recovery period between intervals. The track is a great resource for not only monitoring effort but also teaching your body how to recover during a workout. For intervals longer than 800 meters, follow with a 400-meter easy jog; for shorter intervals, a 200-meter jog is a good standard. As a rule, recovery between intervals should be jogging to help keep the legs moving and flush out lactic acid buildup.



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

**REMEMBER:** ALWAYS COOL DOWN AND STRETCH AFTER A TRACK WORKOUT.