

## **Training for and Racing the Ironman Run**

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*Note: The following is an expanded version of an article which first appeared in the July 2008 issue of 220 magazine.*

It's a daunting challenge. You've just completed a 4km swim and 112 miles of cycling. Now the marathon lies ahead. Whether your goal is to run a personal best or merely get to the finish line, you will need exceptional fitness. How do you prepare for such a task?

### **Training for an Iron-Marathon**

Let's start by quelling a common belief that Ironman triathletes perpetuate. It is not necessary to run a marathon in training for an Ironman. In fact, it is a mistake to do so for most triathletes. A marathon run has little in common with an Ironman run. Twenty-six-point-two miles are a lot longer after several hours of swimming and cycling. And you'll run much slower in an Ironman. A stand-alone marathon is also not the best use of your valuable and limited training time. With a taper before the marathon and the necessary recovery after you can easily lose four to six weeks of Ironman training.

There are better ways to prepare. The journey to your iron-finish line starts with determining the best use of your training. It would be nice if you had a year to prepare but few athletes have that luxury. The minimum for truly affective training is about 23 weeks. That allows for 12 weeks of Base period training, 11 weeks of Build period, two weeks of the Peak period and a Race week. You can do it with fewer weeks if you already have a solid base of fitness established from prior training and racing in the season. In this case, the minimum is about 14 weeks.

### **Base Training**

When it comes to running, the purpose of the Base period is to increase the duration of your weekly long run to no more than three hours in zones 1 and 2 only. Yes, that's right—no more than three hours. In fact, you only need a couple of these. Most of the long endurance runs will be in the neighborhood of two-and-a-half hours. Why? As the duration of your running increases your risk also increases but with no greater benefits gained. In other words, you are more likely to get injured running longer than three hours while becoming no more fit than with shorter runs.

Increase the duration of your long run by about 15 minutes weekly as you build from where you are at the start to three hours.

Doing a second weekly run of about 60 to 90 minutes on a hilly course in the Base period will develop your strength and help you become more efficient. The hills don't have to be steep or long. A course with plenty of grade changes is acceptable. This along with your long workout are the two key weekly run sessions throughout the first three months of general preparation. They should be separated by at least 72 hours.

You may do one to three more runs of less than an hour in each of these weeks depending on your experience, stamina and proneness to injury, but they should be at a comfortable pace. Additional short runs will help your running to become more efficient if you pay attention to your technique. Dragging yourself through additional weekly runs with accumulated fatigue and poor technique just to add to your training log numbers will do more harm than good. And forget about “recovery runs.” There is no such thing for an Ironman triathlete.

It’s important to emphasize that all of your long runs in the Base period are done at a comfortable pace with heart rate no higher than zone 2. The hilly runs may produce higher heart rates and exertion levels, but these remain well below your lactate threshold—the start of zone 5. All other runs are done in zone 1.

Every third or fourth week reduce the volume of your runs (and other training) by half for five days to allow for recovery and rejuvenation. Iron-novices and older athletes who need more frequent breaks from training should use three-week blocks with experienced and younger athletes resting every fourth week. It’s not unusual, however, even for experienced iron-triathletes to back off every third week. I often have the pros I coach do that to avoid training breakdowns and to increase the quality of their training when going hard. If unsure, rest every third week.

### **Build Training**

With 11 weeks to go until race day you start into the Build period. Run training changes just a little now. The greatest change has to do with the purpose of your long run. Whereas in the Base period these were simply done at a comfortable pace staying in zones 1 and 2, in the Build period you will focus in on your race-goal pacing strategy. If you are an experienced triathlete and have done a couple of iron races the highest effort you are likely to run on race day is just above your aerobic threshold. This is high zone 2 using the heart rate zones I describe in *The Triathlete’s Training Bible* (Table 4.5) and will produce your best possible run time. If training for your first or second Ironman, or if a personal best time is *not* your goal, then your training will be a combination of strategic running and walking. I’ll explain.

The experienced triathlete shooting for a “fast” run should do long runs of 2.5 hours now. The first 30 to 90 minutes is a warm-up followed by a one- to two-hour run done in the upper half of the Training Bible zone 2. Watch heart rate closely to ensure that it stays in this narrow zone. It will seem easy at first but become increasingly difficult as the run progresses. This is best done on terrain similar to the race course. Increase the time spent in upper zone 2 by 10 to 15 minutes weekly until you are running two hours at this pace. A sure sign that race fitness is coming along well is that your pace will remain steady even as the zone 2 portion of the run becomes longer. If you gradually get slower at this heart rate then you need to either repeat the shorter aerobic threshold runs, rest more before the long run, do a better job of refueling or change your marathon-pacing strategy.

The novice iron-athlete will also do a weekly 2.5-hour long run only will not be overly concerned with heart rate or pace. The most important part of the race

plan will be to keep moving forward. Your only purpose is to get to the finish line. To do that you need to incorporate walking along with your running. In the race, plan on walking through every aid station. To prepare for this run for nine minutes and then walk for one minute. Do this right from the start of your long run—not when you get tired. It's ok to walk more frequently.

Note that these runs are not done as “bricks”—combined bike-run sessions. They are stand-alone runs done when your legs are at their freshest time in the week. That means the long run should not be done the day after a long bike ride. This will not prepare you for what you will experience in the race. “Chronic fatigue,” the kind you have the day after a long ride, is not the same as “acute fatigue,” the kind you have immediately after a long ride. Running long with chronic fatigue is a good way to become injured. I see iron-triathletes do this frequently. If you are doing long workouts on the weekend when you have more time available for training, make Saturday your long run and Sunday your long ride. Your fitness will progress faster and you'll avoid common breakdowns.

If you are an experienced Ironman, in the Build period replace your weekly Base hill run with a muscular endurance session. Iron-newbies will simply continue to run hills as before.

Raw speed is not a requirement for a personal best iron-marathon. Muscular endurance (ME) is. There are many ways to build your ME. All involve training in heart rate zones 3 and 4 with intervals that are six to twenty minutes long and recoveries of one-fourth that duration. The longer the work interval, the lower the heart rate zone. And, conversely, the shorter the work interval, the higher the heart rate zone. Get in 30 to 60 minutes of ME work in one session each week.

In the Build period you should also do a weekly brick, only what I recommend is undoubtedly far different from what you normally call a “brick.” After your long ride each week transition to a 15-minute run at goal effort. With these rides being in the neighborhood of five hours going longer will only make you more tired and greatly prolong recovery while subsequently compromising quality training in the next week. For an Ironman this is the only brick you need to do. You will not race better by doing more. You will only increase the risk of a breakdown.

About eight weeks before your Ironman and again around four weeks prior include a Big Day of training. These are dress rehearsals to see how you are coming along and to remind you how big of a challenge the race will be. Start the Big Day by having your planned race-day breakfast at the planned time. A couple of hours later swim for an hour. Include some long sets at race pace or faster. Then get off of your legs for 90 minutes and eat a light meal. Ride for five hours doing your standard Build period ride. Again, get off of your legs for an hour and have a light, mostly liquid meal. Run for two hours as described above for the Build period. You will learn a lot about your progress these days. Adjust your training for the next four weeks accordingly.

## **Racing an Iron-Marathon**

Your strategy for the race is simply to do what you've done successfully in training the past few weeks—assuming you've done things as described above. However, there are a few lessons that experienced Ironman finishers have learned which will help you. Let's flatten the learning curve for you by at least coming to understand them intellectually if not yet emotionally. For some athletes it takes an emotional experience for them to grasp the magnitude of these lessons. But I will guarantee you that if you simply accept and incorporate them into your psyche now you will have a better race day.

**Lesson #1.** Your effort on the bike determines your run performance. If you hammer the bike and drag into T2 wasted your marathon will be a disaster. The more you hold back on the bike, the better your run will be. That's obvious and yet it's remarkable how difficult a lesson this is to learn for most triathletes.

**Lesson #2.** Be patient until the half-way point of the marathon. If you were smart enough to pace the bike appropriately you're likely to start the run with visions of an incredibly fast run dancing through your head. Hold back. Don't go with your emotions. Go with your plan. Going too fast now will come back to haunt you in the last 10k.

**Lesson #3.** Nutrition on the bike determines how well you will run. Get your on-bike nutrition nailed down tight in training. And then make no changes of any type on race day. Your run will go smoothly if you do. Take a cavalier approach to nutrition and the letters "DNF" (did not finish) await you.

**Lesson #4.** You will experience two bad "patches" during the run; just keep moving forward despite them. There will be two times when you say to yourself, "I'm not going to make it." These are likely to happen in the last half. Accept right now that this will happen and resolve to keep moving forward when it does. The finish line is waiting for you.

### **Bottom Line**

Persistence and patience are essential for success in the Ironman. No where is this more evident than in training for the run portion. Consistent and moderate training is the key to attaining your goal. Attempts to find shortcuts to run fitness by doing mega-workouts and huge volume will likely lead to three letters that are even worse than DNF—"DNS" (did not start).

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### **Boxout 1**

Three key Ironman run sessions

**Long Run.** Run between two and three hours weekly in the Build period at race goal pace. For the experienced and competitive triathlete this is the upper half of zone 2 heart rate. For the novice this is combined walking and running at an easy and comfortable effort.

**Muscular Endurance Intervals.** The experienced Ironman athlete runs work intervals that are 6 to 20 minutes long in heart rate zones 3 and 4 with recoveries one-fourth as long as the intervals. Get in 30 to 60 minutes of accumulated work interval time within a session.

**Hill Run.** On a course with lots of hills of any grade or length run for 60 to 90 minutes. Run up the hills at a steady, moderately hard effort. Run down the hills easily to recover before the next hill.

## Boxout 2

Nutrition plan for the race day.

The purpose here is to find what works best for you during your long training runs and especially on your Big Days. The starting point is to try the sports drink the race will offer at aid stations. If that works in these workouts then you are set. If it doesn't you may need to carry gels with you on race day and wash them down with water from the aid stations. Determine which one is best. You will probably need between 100 and 300 calories per hour from carbohydrate sources only depending on body size, running effort and the preceding on-bike nutrition.