

Jennifer A. Gritt on the track to cutting three minutes from her 5K PR.

Getting Faster

BY JENNIFER A. GRITT

How and Why to Introduce Speedwork to Your Training

I smoked a pack of cigarettes a day, on and off, for almost seven years. So when I made the decision four years ago to stop smoking and start running, well, let's just say I wasn't very fast. When I was finally strong enough as a runner to start participating in local races, my average time for 5K hovered around 30 minutes, and I was more or less just grateful I finished without having to stop and walk.

As time passed, however, and I started running more and more, the urge to run faster took hold. It was then that I realized that if I was ever going to get the faster times I wanted, simply running all-out for as long as I could during the first mile of a race was not the way to do it. So I decided to get help.

Lucky for me, my sister, Nancy Gritt, coaches cross country at St. Norbert College, a Division III school in DePere, WI. In addition, she is a competitive runner whose best 5K is 19:17. She had been supportive when I began running, offering advice and answering my questions. But now I wanted to get faster, and I didn't know where to begin. Since she was the first coach to lead the St. Norbert women to back-to-back conference titles, I figured she could help.

First, Nancy outlined a weekly running schedule for me to ensure that I had built up enough endurance to begin speed training. This is vitally important. As my sister stressed, without a solid base of weekly running mileage, there is no way a runner is going to be able to safely and effectively incorporate speed training into workouts.

Stanford University Men's Cross Country Coach Andrew Gerard agreed. Gerard emphasized that, while speed training can be very beneficial, runners who are just beginning to race need to focus on basic conditioning first. "The bottom line is, if you're looking at running a 5K [or] 10K, speed is a very small percentage of what you're trying to get done," he says. "Endurance is more important."

But for those runners who are already pretty fit, speed training is the next step toward setting faster goal times and lowering personal records. Last year my goal was to shave a minute off each mile of my 5K race time, and I was anxious to begin the training—but on my journey to becoming a faster runner, I hit a few speed bumps.

Joseph Kelly

WORKOUT SCHEDULE A Plan for Introducing Speedwork to Your Training

Week	Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday
1	40 min. long and easy	30 min. general conditioning	1600m intervals (1x800m, 2x400m)	25 to 30 min. easy recovery
2	45 min. long and easy	30 min. general conditioning	2400m intervals (2x800m, 2x400m)	30 to 35 min. easy recovery
3	45 min. long and easy	35 min. general conditioning	3200m intervals (1x1200m, 1x800m, 3x400m)	30 to 35 min. easy recovery
4	50 min. long and easy	35 min. general conditioning	3600m intervals (1x1600m, 1x1200m, 2x400m)	30 to 35 min. easy recovery
5	50 min. long and easy	35 to 40 min. general conditioning	4000m intervals (1x1600m, 1x1200m, 1x800m, 1x400m)	35 to 40 min. easy recovery
6	55 min. long and easy	35 to 40 min. general conditioning	4400m intervals (2x1200m, 2x800m, 1x400m)	35 to 40 min. easy recovery
7	55 min. long and easy	40 min. general conditioning	4800m intervals (2x1600m, 2x800m)	40 to 45 min. easy recovery
8	60 min. long and easy	40 min. general conditioning	4800m intervals (4x800m, 4x400m)	45 min. easy recovery
9	60 min. long and easy	35 min. general conditioning	4800m intervals (4x400m, 2x3200m)	35 min. easy recovery

Each workout should be preceded by a warm-up and followed with a cool-down. The rest between intervals should be at least as long as the interval, but no more than four minutes.

Practicing Pace

My first track workout was an eye-opening experience. After completing some warm-up laps, my task was to complete four 400m intervals in 1:55 each. I ended up running the first two way too fast, coming in at around 1:35, while my last two were closer to the actual pace I should have been running. Although I felt good about how fast I ran the first two 400m, I later learned that this was the biggest mistake beginners can make—going out too hard, too fast. What was worse was that my hamstrings were so tight the next day the sight of stairs was enough to bring tears to my eyes.

As Gerard explained, when runners start doing speed workouts, “the last [interval] should be as fast as the first one.” My sister went on to point out that it doesn’t pay to train at a 6:40 mile pace if your target time for a 5K is 24:51, an 8:00 minute mile pace. The goal, according to my sister, was to develop what she calls “smart legs” that have the “muscle knowledge of the goal pace.” What this meant was that the whole point of me doing the 400m intervals at a 7:40 pace was so that my body would know what it is like to race at that pace. Despite how tempting it is to run 400m at faster than my goal pace, by doing so, my body was not being trained to run at the speed I wanted it to over a 3.1-mile course. This was the hardest thing for me to learn and the most frustrating habit to break. Moreover, completing a few track workouts of 400m intervals was only the first installment on the long, hard investment of speed training. But I knew that if I could just gut it out and work hard at running my goal pace, the payoff would be well worth it in the end.

Consistent Conditioning

The key, I learned, was consistency. Only upon setting a realistic 5K goal would I be able to get serious about speed. For the first couple of weeks runners should only include one speed workout in their general running schedule followed by a day of recovery, where you run 25 to 30 minutes easy (see workout sidebar). Initially, the total speed workout should not exceed 1600m. My sister was careful to point out that different runners might be more comfortable doing different intervals. For example, an individual who wants to begin speed training at a 6:40 pace might do better running one 400m at 1:40, one 800m at 3:20, and finishing out with another 400m. Another runner might be more comfortable and less likely to go out too hard running the entire 1600m at 6:40 in one shot. Either way, the point is to start with one 1600m speed workout a week and build from there.

Once runners have conditioned themselves to handle the first couple of weeks of speed training, they should increase their speed distance by 400m to 800m a week until they hit a total of three miles of speed training once or twice a week. These intervals can be altered as the training progresses. For example, for a 3200m track workout, runners can do 3x800m and 2x400m or 1x400m, 1x800m, 1x1200m and 1x800m so long as they stay within 10 seconds of their goal pace. If a runner has her sights set on a particular race where she wishes to debut her speed training, my sister recommends achieving those three miles of speed training three to four weeks before race day. This, combined with general conditioning and progression workouts (where runners start out slower and gradually get faster throughout the run), will ensure that a runner’s body is ready to run the entire 5K at the goal pace. And it works.

HOW FAST? The Right Pace for Speedwork

Running too fast during speedwork is a common mistake. For races of 5K or more, running repeats at your 5K race pace will maximize the benefits. Any faster may overstress your body so that you can’t complete the other important runs in the week and make you more susceptible to injury. Here are a few race goals broken down into their component intervals. Choose one that is realistic but challenging, and run the intervals within a few seconds of the goal times.

5K Race Goal	Goal Paces for Intervals			
	1600m	1200m	800m	400m
17:00	5:29	4:07	2:45	1:22
18:30	5:58	4:29	2:59	1:30
21:00	6:46	5:05	3:23	1:42
24:00	7:45	5:48	3:52	1:56
27:00	8:43	6:32	4:21	2:11
29:00	9:21	7:01	4:41	2:20

Thursday	Friday	Saturday
30 min. general conditioning	35 min. progression	rest
30 min. general conditioning	30 min. hills (repeats or within run)	rest
35 min. general conditioning	35 to 45 min. progression	rest
35 min. general conditioning	35 to 45 min. progression to threshold	rest
35 to 40 min. general conditioning	hilly run or repeats	rest
35 to 40 min. general conditioning	40 to 45 min. progression	rest
35 to 40 min. general conditioning	40 to 45 min. progression	rest
40 min. general conditioning	30 min. threshold 15 to 20 secs. faster than race pace	rest
30 min. general conditioning	20 min. strides or accelerations	*Race day—go get 'em!

Last year I went from running a 28:39 5K in May to a 25:32 in September. And this year, I'm hoping to get that race time all the way down to 22:47.

Beaucoup Benefits

Speed training, when done properly, can help average runners shave several minutes off of their race times, but is vitally important to runners at all levels. Tennessee women's coach J.J. Clark utilizes speed training two to three times a week and designs his workouts around each runner's strength. "I'm trying to make them comfortable in their event," he explains. Clark adds, "speedwork can change mechanics," so someone is not as strong when it comes to running hills or in mud, he will design speed workouts to help the runner target these issues.

Stanford's Gerard, who also incorporates speed workouts two or three times a week into his program, encourages his athletes to emphasize speed year-round. "It's critical all the way through," Gerard explained, stressing that speed workouts can make a huge difference in the last 400m of a race. Moreover, he continued, "there are biomechanical advantages you can get from speed [training] that can stretch across a whole race," such as a runner being able to accelerate in response to another runner's surge. But for the most part, "you want to emphasize being more efficient."


Both Clark and Gerard were quick to stress, however, that speed training should not increase prior to an important race. Instead, the regularly scheduled workouts become a greater priority for their athletes.

Gerard went on to point out the advantages of having a strong upper body in the

process of obtaining greater speed. "Arms can be a key to running faster," he said, as the legs will have a tendency to mirror the arms. And while building upper-body strength is not a dominant part of his training program, Gerard requires his athletes to incorporate strength conditioning into their workouts. Nancy acknowledges the benefits of strong arms as well and was the first to teach me to start pumping my arms harder during the last 800m of a race, which in turn has helped me develop a strong kick.

Right Running: Race Results

In the end, all the coaches I talked to agreed that the most important aspect of speed training is doing it right. Runners are cautioned to set a realistic goal and then incorporate the appropriate speed training into their running program in order to reach it. Running speed workouts at a faster pace than what your target pace calls for will not necessarily get you to the finish line faster. Nor will progressing your speed workouts too much, too soon. What it can do, however, is set you up for the one thing you usually want to avoid—injury. Clark summed it up best: "In order to stress 'fast,' you have to do it a certain way or else you get hurt."

Speed training has helped me significantly lower my average 5K time, and I have no doubts that it will continue to help me lower it even further. For now, I'm content to focus on my current workout schedule with visions of a 22:47 in my head. And who knows? Maybe next year I'll be fast enough to catch my sister. 

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