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Roy Pirrung column: With effort, it's possible to improve distance-running times

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One question often heard from runners who have become racers is, "How do I run faster?"

The usual reply is, "Train faster."

Sounds easy enough, but how do we do it?

With top runners clocking five-minute miles or less for the marathon distance of 26.2-miles, and shorter distances being covered well under that pace, what is their secret?

The top runners cover more ground in the same time as most of us do. This is done through a longer stride. Some of the top runners cover nearly 6 feet in each stride they take.

At 5-minute-per-mile pace, most top runners take 90 strides, or 180 steps. That pace means they are covering 1,056 feet per minute, or 5.8 feet per stride and this helps explain why they are so fast.

Most of us cannot cover that much ground because our natural stride length is far from that of an elite runner, and increasing your stride length is very limited.

It is possible though, to increase our cadence, the natural rhythm, or turnover of our legs.

First, determine how many strides you are taking per minute by counting your steps for a half-minute, then doubling it to give you your base cadence.

Running over a route of about 6 miles, with several hills, begin by consciously making an effort to increase the number of steps you take on the uphill portions of your course.

It is natural that you take smaller steps on uphill sections so start by increasing the number of steps per minute on hills with a slight grade by five steps per minute.

You can do this workout once each week, as it will not be too taxing.

Each week add another five steps per minute until you reach the 90 strides per minute and add longer and steeper hills as you progress to the 90 strides goal. This will feel strange at first, but running fast will be the result, so bear with the feeling.

Over the course of several weeks, these hill sessions will produce the cadence required to run faster.

Eventually, you'll know your cadence without the need to count your steps. Once you have this down on the hilly sections, it is time to start practicing on the flatter portions of the course.

Practice one week's cadence on the uphill, then the next on the flats, and lastly the downhill portion.

Your goal to run fast is accomplished by running comfortably at this increased cadence through your entire workout, thereby producing faster running times in the races you enter.

To be able to have that "comfortable" feeling you will also need to add a long run once a week, or at the least every other week.

This is the endurance side of your training to become a faster runner. The two go hand-in-hand; there is no shortcut to your goal.

Increase your distance by no more than 10 percent per week to minimize the chance of injuries. If you normally run 6 miles per day then a run of about six-and-a-half miles would be your next step up the ladder to longer distances.

Like speed work, distance work should be done every 7 to 14 days to accrue the benefits.

If you are planning a marathon and desire to lower that time, you must combine these two training methods as well.

To train your legs to run fast while tired, try including a speed session with an endurance session.

Start your marathon speed training session with an "easy" pace, being more concerned with time than speed. Run between 50 and 60 minutes then follow this with 3 or 4 mile repeats at a pace near your 10k pace, then follow with another 30 to 40 minutes of "easy" running.

By introducing speed and endurance sessions into your training, you will successfully become a faster runner.

Roy Pirrung is a world and American ultra-marathon champion, American record-holder and a member of the USA Track and Field Masters Hall of Fame.