

Starting Where You Left Off

From the May '01 Port City Pacers PaceLeter

For as long as I can remember, I've been aware that after any hard workout at a given pace, that particular "gear" is completely useless the next day or next workout. If I walk a hard set of intervals at 6:45 per mile, I have a very difficult time doing anything at the same pace the next day; after a 20-miler, even if I don't push particularly hard, I can't seem to get rolling at the same pace the next day. I can go easier, or even do short intervals at a faster pace, but that particular "pace gear" is invariably shot for the next 48 hours or so.

So I do what most endurance athletes do. I use a hard day/easy day approach in my training. But even so, it's quite common for me to feel like garbage on my easy days after going hard the day before, and it's equally likely that I'll feel fairly sluggish at the beginning of my hard workouts after going slow the day before.

Over time I've discovered a way around this "morning after" effect. I've found that by adding a little twist to the end of every training session I can minimize the cruddy or sluggish feeling at the start of the next day's workout. It ain't rocket science. All I do is make sure I finish every workout at the same pace that I plan on going the next day. If I've done a hard interval or tempo workout, my legs are usually shot. All I really want to do is slog through a few hundred meters of very slow walking and call it a day. But I know that if I do that, the next day my legs will want to go the same horribly slow pace. I *do* want to go slow that next day, but not *that* slow! So all I have to do is accelerate a bit through my cool down laps, finishing up at about the pace that I'll be going the next day, and *voilà*, my legs will be ready to go at the appropriate pace the following day.

Similarly, if I do an easy workout, I'll always make sure to accelerate through the last few kilometers, or even do a few 100- to 200- meter repeats after the workout to get my legs fired up for the next day's training.

Physiologists and coaches often speak of "muscle memory," and tout the benefits of "specificity." And I've seen a lot written about using a few short intervals at race pace in the 48 hours before competition to get the neuromuscular system and the metabolic enzymes in the leg muscles "fired up" for the upcoming race. Even so, I've never seen anything written specifically about tailoring the end of your workouts to help prepare you for the next day's training.

So I asked some experts in the running community for their input. Roy Benson—who is often called (by me anyway...) "the Dave McGovern of the running community"—and physiologist and coach Jack Daniels both noted some experience with the phenomenon. Daniels in particular suggested that "Some rather fast 200s at the end of a threshold workout seem to always leave the runner feeling better than if he or she were to have quit after the main workout."

So I think I may be on to something. It has been suggested that athletes and coaches are best at finding out what training methodologies work, while exercise physiologists are pretty much out there to explain why. I fully agree, but since I haven't been able to find much corroborating evidence in the literature about using the muscle memory effect in training as opposed to using it solely for race preparation, I'd love to hear what YOU have to say on the subject. If anyone else out there has experienced a similar effect, where you've been successful (or unsuccessful) at using similar-paced cool downs to prepare for your upcoming workouts or races, please post your thoughts to the Pacer Forum at www.PCPacers.org, or to me directly at DMcG@Racewalking.org.

Happy Trails (and roads and tracks, too!)

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