

The Ultimate 5-K Plan

Whether you're looking to run your first 5-K or your fastest, we've got the six-week program to get you there

by: **Doug Rennie**

The 5-K is a great distance for every level of runner. It's fail-safe short for fidgety first-timers. There's one nearly every weekend for personal-record-chasing intermediates. And it's the ideal fast time trial, tough tempo run, or 10-K-to-marathon tune-up for veteran competitors. On the following pages, you'll find six-week schedules for each of the three groups. You'll also see what we call the "Four Training Universals." Check these out before getting to your schedule, as these principles apply to everyone. But first things first. Have a look at the three training levels below to determine which describes you best, and therefore what schedule you should follow.

Beginner: You're running recreationally two to three times a week for a total of six to eight-plus miles, and you've done a few fun-run shorties. But now you want to enter a real race--and finish. Join the order of road racers. Score that first race T-shirt. Earn some bragging rights at the office.

Intermediate: You've been running consistently for at least a year and have run in a few races but mainly for the experience. You've dabbled in some modest interval training. Now you want to think seriously about your finishing time and how to lower it: to race, not just participate.

Advanced: You have at least several years of serious running behind you, follow a year-round schedule, have run in many races at various distances, have done regular interval training, want to discover your personal performance ceiling, and are willing to push hard in training.

Four Training Universals

Rest

No running at all. Walk, bike, or swim, if you want to--just not very hard. Don't regard rest days as "nothing" days, but rather a different kind of training that allows your body to recover while it absorbs and consolidates the strength gains your hard runs produce.

Easy Runs

Totally comfortable. Breathing hard enough to know that you're running, but still able to hold up your end of an on-the-run chat. If you can't, it's too hard; on the other hand, if you can sing every verse of "Honky Tonk Woman" en route, it's too easy.

Long Runs

Anything longer than race distance whose purpose is to build endurance, specifically the ability to run for longer and longer periods of time without crapping out.

Speed

Shorter than race distance repetitions at or below your goal race pace. Can be hard to very hard to nearly flat-out. Produces leg speed, elevated lactic threshold, stamina, biomechanical efficiency, and the ability to tolerate the discomfort that's essential to racing fitness.

Racing Flats

Will they make you faster? Yes. Studies have shown that if the load on your feet is lightened by 200 grams (about six ounces, the weight difference between training shoes and racing flats), you'll take one to two percent less time to cover a given distance--so, for a 24-minute 5-K, you can shave 12 to 20 seconds off your time by wearing racing flats.

Continued...

Beginner

At this stage, you just run. A little more this week than the week before, a tad more the week to follow. No interval training, no flirting with injuries, no serious discomfort. Just run.

"For runners without a competitive past, the first training goal is to raise mileage by adding easy volume," says former U.S. Olympian and Intenet coach Jon Sinclair (anaerobic.net). "First of all, it develops increased aerobic conditioning, which by itself yields faster times. Second, it produces the physical strength on which later, harder training can be built."

What about interval training at this level? "Not a good idea," says Sinclair. "Adding any intensity in the form of fartlek or hills to a person's program can be dangerous and counterproductive. At this stage in a runner's development, the first rule should be: 'Do no harm.' If they just run more, they will, in a few months, run faster."

Remember: Every run in this six-week schudule should be a steady run, done at an effort that has you breathing "comfortably hard," but way, way short of squinty-eyed wheezing. Enjoy each run, feel yourself getting stronger and leaner, be proud of what you're doing.

Week	M	T	W	T	F	S	S	TOTAL
1	Rest	2 miles	Rest	2 miles	Rest	2 miles	Rest	6 miles
2	Rest	2.5 miles	Rest	2.5 miles	Rest	2.5 miles	Rest	7.5 miles
3	Rest	3 miles	Rest	3 miles	Rest	2.5 miles	2 miles	10.5 miles
4	Rest	3.5 miles	Rest	3.5 miles	Rest	3 miles	2 miles	12 miles
5	Rest	4 miles	2 miles	3.5 miles	Rest	3.5 miles	2 miles	15 miles
Taper	Rest	4 miles	2 miles	Rest	2 miles	Rest	5-K Race	

Race Day Rules

"For a beginner, expending energy in a race can be scary and looked upon as a big barrier," says Portland, Oregon based coach Bob Williams (pacethyself.com). "But if you've run at least that long in training many times, and run negative splits--first half slower than the second--in the race, you'll enjoy the experience and finish feeling good."

Have an energy-bar breakfast with some fluids, then arrive early so you can pick up your race number and avoid the drain of long lines. Do a little warmup walking and jogging, sip some water, stretch a bit, and generally hang out and stay stress-free until the start. Remind yourself that your goal is to finish, to run the whole way, to finish feeling tired--but not trashed.

Intermediate

To segue from finisher to racer, you'll need to add more weekly miles, yes, but more important, intensity in the form of timed intervals both at (pace intervals) and below (speed intervals) your 5-K goal pace, along with a crucial weekly hill-training session.

"Running hills once a week--a five- to six-grade is optimal--at a fairly hard effort for up to three minutes at a time is an ideal way to get stronger," says Sinclair. How come? Because hill training greatly improves leg and gluteal strength while increasing aerobic capacity and stride length, along with ankle flexion that enables you to "pop" off the ground more quickly.

How hard is "fairly hard"? A classic study from years ago found that running up even a slight hill at a steady pace raises your heart rate up to 26 beats higher than the same effort on the flat. So 5-K effort (not pace) is what to shoot for.

Again, regarding intensity as opposed to mileage, a recent study in the online journal Peak Performance found that you'll run your best races from 5-K up not when you've run the most miles, but when you hit a reasonable mileage level and then crank up your intensity.

Stuff You Need to Know

Pace Intervals (PI) If your 5-K goal is 10:00 pace (31:02 finishing time), run pace intervals at 1:15 (for 200 meters), 2:30 (400m), 5:00 (800m). For 9:00 goal pace (27:56), it's 1:07 (200m), 2:15 (400m), 4:30 (800m). For 8:00 minute goal pace (24:50), it's 1:00 (200m), 2:00 (400m), 4:00 (800m). For 7:00 goal pace (21:44), it's 0:53 (200m), 1:45 (400m), 3:30 (800m).

Speed Intervals (SI) For 10:00 pace, run 1:11 (for 200 meters), 2:22 (400m), 4:44 (800m). For 9:00 pace, it's 1:04 (200m), 2:08 (400m), 4:15 (800m). For 8:00 pace, it's 0:56 (200 m), 1:53 (400m), 3:45 (800m). For 7:00 pace, it's 0:49 (200m), 1:38 (400m), 3:15 (800m).

Recovery Time For pace intervals, slowly jog half the distance of the repetition (i.e., 200m jog after 400m repetitions). For speed intervals, jog equal distance (i.e., 400m jog after 400m repetitions).

Hills and Easy Runs For 9:00 pace, use the lower number; 7:00 folks move toward the higher.

Interval and Hill Days Jog 2 miles, then run 4x100m strides to get primed before the workout. Jog 2 miles to cool down after, then stretch.

Week	M	T	W	T	F	S	S	Total
1	Rest	6x400m PI	2-5 miles, easy	Hills, 5-8 min	Rest	2-5 miles, easy	4-6 miles, easy	17-25 miles
2	Rest	2x800m PI, 2x400m PI, 2x200m PI	2-5 miles, easy	Hills, 5-8 min	Rest	2-5 miles, easy	4-6miles, easy	17-25 miles
3	Rest	2x800m PI, 2x400m SI, 4x200m SI	2-5 miles, easy	Hills, 6-9 min	Rest	2-5 miles, easy	5-7 miles, easy	19-25 miles
4	Rest	2x800m PI, 1x800m SI, 2x400m SI, 2x200m SI	2-5 miles, easy	Hills, 6-9 min	Rest	2-5 miles, easy	5-8 miles, easy	19-28 miles
5	Rest	2x800m SI, 4x400m SI, 4x200m SI	2-5 miles, easy	Hills, 7-10 min	Rest	2-5 miles, easy	6-9 miles, easy	21-30 miles
Taper	Rest	4x400m SI, 4x200m SI	2-5 miles, easy	Rest	3x200m SI, 3x150m SI, 6x100m SI	Rest	5-K Race	

Race Day Rules

"It's all about negative splits," says Bob Williams. "Always." Which means you run the first half of the race slower than the second half. Tough to do when you're pumped up, but you must. Hold back in the first mile, Williams advises, then "seek out other runners to pass in the second mile, but don't push beyond a comfortably hard effort." Increase gradually to discomfort in the last mile, and over the final 400 meters, try to pick it up.

Advanced

Two words define the training goal at this stage of your running life: "race feel." To reach your 5-K ceiling, you must replicate in training how it feels to run that far that fast. Which means timed repetitions both at (pace) and faster than (speed) your 5-K goal pace--but with short recovery. Uncomfortably short. Because in a race, of course, there is no recovery. So the more intimate you become with the sensations of the race itself on a twice-weekly basis, the more you'll be able to handle the 5-K's physical and mental combination punches on race day.

You have legendary British coach Frank Horwill to thank for this. Horwill found that when athletes were stuck at a certain 5-K time--sometimes for years--and could not break through, they were almost always running lots of repetitions significantly faster than 5-K race pace (sometimes as fast as 56 seconds) with 400-meter jogs. When Horwill pointed out that they would not get 400-meter recovery periods in a race, the usual reply was, "But I'm running so much faster than race pace." Sorry, Horwill said, doesn't work that way.

Invariably, when he had his runners do the repeats slightly faster than projected 5-K pace, with recovery jogs as short as 50 meters (about 20 seconds), their times dropped. "They needed to get the feel of what it was like to run a tough 5-K race," Horwill explained. "The recovery time after repetitions at 5-K pace is a crucial factor. Figure to jog a quarter to a half of the distance of the repetition.

Stuff You Need To Know

Pace Intervals (PI) For 8:00 pace (24:50 finishing time), run 1:00 (for 200 meters), 1:30 (300m), 2:00 (400m), 4:00 (800m), 6:00 (1200m). For 6:00 pace (18:38), run 0:45 (200m), 1:07 (300m), 1:30 (400m), 3:00 (800m), 4:30 (1200m).

Speed Intervals (SI) For 8:00 pace, run 0:56 (200m), 1:19 (300m), 1:52 (400m), 3:44 (800m), 5:38 (1200m). For 6:00 pace, run 0:41 (200m), 1:01 (300m), 1:22 (400m), 2:44 (800m), 4:08 (1200m).

STRIDES (S) Gradually pick up speed to 90 percent effort, hold that for 20 yards, then decelerate. Do four to six repetitions of 80-100m after Wed. and/or Sat. runs.

Recovery Time For pace intervals, jog a quarter the distance of the repetition (i.e., 100m jog after 400m repetitions). For speed intervals, jog half the distance.

Interval and Hill Days Jog 2 miles to warm up, then do 4x100m strides to get primed for the workout. Jog 2 miles to cool down, then stretch.

Week	M	T	W	T	F	S	S	Total
1	Rest	2x1200m PI, 2x800m PI, 4x100m S	4-6 miles, easy	2x800m SI, 2x400m SI, 4x200m SI	Rest	4-6 miles, easy	7-9 miles, easy	28-34 miles
2	Rest	10x300m PI, 4x100m S	4-6 miles, easy	2x1200m SI, 1x800m SI, 2x400m SI, 4x200m SI	Rest	4-6 miles, easy	7-9 miles, easy	28-34 miles
3	Rest	2x1200m PI, 2x800m PI, 2x400m PI, 4x400m S	4-6 miles, easy	2x800m SI, 4x400m SI, 4x200m SI	Rest	4-6 miles, easy	8-10 miles, easy	29-35 miles
4	Rest	3x800m SI, 4x100m S	4-6 miles, easy	3x800m SI, 3x400m SI, 3x200m SI, 2x100m S	Rest	4-6 miles, easy	8-10 miles, easy	30-36 miles
5	Rest	2x1200m PI 2x800m PI 2x400m PI 2x200m PI	4-6 miles, easy	4x400m SI 4x300m SI 4x200m SI 4x100m S	Rest	4-6 miles, easy	8-10 miles, easy	31-37 miles
Taper	Rest	2x400m SI 2x300m SI 2x200m SI Full Recovery 6x100m S	3 miles, easy	4x200m SI 4x100m S	Rest	2 miles, easy	5-K Race	