

Speedwork For All!

Most of us can come up with plenty of reasons to avoid speedwork: it hurts; it increases our chances of picking up an injury; it makes us too tired for our other runs; we don't need it for running marathons... the list is endless. The thing is, they're all unnecessary fears. What's more, whether you want to beat an ancient 800m PB set on the grass track at school, or outkick the runner who always sprints past you in local 10Ks, adding speed will be immensely rewarding.

Speedwork doesn't just make you run faster. It makes you fitter, increases the range of movement in your joints, makes you more comfortable at all speeds, and it will ultimately help you to run harder for longer.

If you've already added a speed session or two to your schedule then you'll know all of this already. If you haven't, then here are a few things to remember.

Ease into it

When you started running, you ran for just a couple of miles every other day, and have gradually built up to your current mileage. You didn't suddenly start running 35 miles a week, so adopt the same approach to speedwork. Put at least three months of steady running behind you, then start with just one session every 10 days or so.

Not too hard

Speed sessions aren't about sprinting flat out until you're sick. They're about controlling hard efforts and spreading your energy evenly over a set distance or time, just like you would in a perfect race.

Warm up and warm down

Before each session, jog for at least 8-10 minutes to raise your blood temperature, increase bloodflow to the muscles and psyche yourself up for fast running. Follow that with some gentle stretching and then run a few fast strides before getting down to the tough stuff. Afterwards, jog for another 5-10 minutes, before stretching once again.

Find a partner

Speedwork takes more effort and willpower than going out for a gentle jog. It's much easier and more fun to train with someone else – and if you really want to improve, try running with someone just a bit quicker than you.

Quality not quantity

Speed training should not account for more than 15 per cent of your total mileage. So slot in your speed sessions around the regular work you've been doing all along.

Types Of Speedwork

Repetitions/intervals

Periods of hard running at 5K pace or faster, between 200m and 1200m in length, or 30 seconds and five minutes. Recovery periods can be short (30-90 seconds), or of an equal time or distance to the reps. Running at harder than race pace for short periods not only improves speed, but also allows you to work on your running form. When you're pushing hard, it's important to concentrate on things like arm and hand motion, posture and stride length. If you can keep these together during a hard session of reps, it will be easier to do so during a race. Don't attempt reps until you've tried other types of speedwork for a couple of months.

Tempo intervals

These are longer than ordinary intervals in that they take between 90 seconds and 10 minutes (or between 400m and two miles) and are run a little slower than your 5K pace. These work a bit like threshold runs – they raise the point at which lactic acid builds up in the muscles.

Fartlek

Fartlek is Swedish for 'speed play' and is the fun side of speedwork. Best done on grass or trails, you simply mix surges of hard running with periods of easy running. Run fast bursts between phone boxes, lampposts or trees when you feel like it, and as hard you like. Great for newcomers to speedwork.

Hills

Simple: find a hill that takes between 30 seconds and five minutes to climb at 85-90 per cent effort, and run up it. Jog back down to recover. A great alternative to track intervals.

Pacing Yourself

When you start speedwork you might find pacing yourself difficult. If you've run a 5K race and a session calls for that pace, then you'll have an idea of what it feels like. But if you haven't raced the distance indicated for the session, don't worry, because you're most likely to find the right pace through trial and error anyway.

While the idea of speedwork is obviously to run quickly, you'll rarely be running flat out. Instead, the time for each rep should be pretty similar, unless indicated otherwise. Run too hard at the start of a session and your times will fall off; take it too easy to begin with and you will speed up, but the session won't benefit you as much as it should.

In fact, for your first sessions it's better to be cautious, because you don't want to immediately hate speedwork, and you'll know that next time you can push yourself harder.

Speed Sessions That Will Guarantee Faster Running

Below are sessions matched to ability that will boost your speed. You don't have to try them all, but give some of them a go – especially if you want to shave a few seconds off PBs at all distances. And if you find one that you really like, just keep adapting it by adding reps or increasing the distances as you become fitter (and faster).

Sessions For Beginners

If you haven't tried speedwork before, here's a (relatively) gentle introduction. Try one session a week if you can. If that's too much, then attempt one session every 10 days.

1. You could start with a session of tempo intervals. How about six minutes brisk, one-minute walk, six minutes brisk, one-minute walk, six minutes brisk.
2. Hills are also an excellent way to start speedwork. Try 6 x 1 minute uphill, then jog back down. Gradually add extra reps until you can complete 10.
3. Add some fartlek training to your schedule. To begin, try just a 25-minute run with quick bursts.
4. Interval session: 6 x 1 minute, with two- to three-minute jog/walk recoveries, or 5 x 2 minutes with five-minute recoveries.
5. After two months or so of speedwork, you can try your first session of repetitions: 5 x 300m, with four-minute recoveries; 5 x 200m, with three-minute rests; or how about 10 x 200m with three-minute recoveries.
6. Glide downhill: on down slopes during long runs, go with the hill and allow it to pick up your pace to around 80-85 per cent of flat-out, just letting gravity power you downhill. Don't go any further than 150m. The idea is to speed up without using any extra energy.

Sessions For Intermediates

Once you've eased yourself into speedwork with two or three months of the beginners' sessions, you'll want to try something different. Here are few ideas to get you started. If you're interested in improving your pure speed – you're trying a 1500m track race or want a killer kick – then concentrate on the shorter reps like the 200s or 400s. If it's speed endurance you're after – you want to run longer distances quickly – then try the longer intervals. You might balk at the idea of running five or six one-mile reps at 10K pace, but just remember that you have to do this, without any rest, in a race anyway. Try to fit in at least one session a week, and mix pure speed sessions with speed-endurance sessions for the best of both worlds.

1. Pyramid sessions: so called because you start with a short distance, gradually increase, and then come back down again. These, as well as the following two sessions – are ideal if you're planning a few track races. For example, start at 120m, add 20m to each rep until you reach 200m, and then come back down to 120m. Run these at 400m pace, with a walk-back recovery.
2. Fast reps of 200m or 300m: run 6-10 x 200m, with two- to three-minute recoveries, or 5-8 x 300m, with four- to five-minute recoveries. Start both at 800m pace, eventually running the last reps flat out. You can also combine the two, for example 3 x 200m, 2 x 300m, 3 x 200m.
3. Simulation session: in theory this should replicate an 800m race. Run two sets of either 500m + 300m, or 600m + 200m, at your target 800m pace, with 60 seconds or less to recover between each rep and 10 minutes between sets.
4. Run just one set of 500m, 400m, 300m, 200m, 100m. Start at 1500m pace and get increasingly quicker on each rep. The recovery between each rep should be 60-90 seconds.
5. Find a large, open area such as a football pitch. Mark out a circuit of roughly 800-1000m. Once you've warmed up, run a circuit at your 5K pace, jog for five minutes, then run a second circuit about three seconds faster than the last. Continue speeding up by three seconds until you've completed five circuits.
6. 5 x 800m at a pace 10 seconds faster per 800m than your usual 5K pace. Recover between intervals for the same amount of time it takes you to run them. As you get fitter, increase the number of reps to seven and gradually cut recoveries to 30 seconds.
7. A two- to three-mile warm-up, then 4 x 1 mile at a pace which is faster than your 10K pace, with a three-minute recovery jog between each rep. Finish with a two- to three-mile jog.
8. Pyramids work for long distances too: 1000m, 2000m, 3000m, 2000m, 1000m at your half-marathon race pace, with a three- to four-minute recovery jog between each effort.
9. Don't fancy a full pyramid? Then go for a half: 400m, 800m, 1200m, 1600m, 2000m, each run faster than your 10K pace but not flat out. Jog 400m between each – but you can take three to four minutes for this.
10. Divide 1000m into: 400m at 5K race pace, with a 400m jog; 300m at race pace, with a 300m jog; 200m slightly quicker than race pace, with a 200m jog; 100m slightly quicker, but still not flat out, with a 100m jog. Do all recoveries at marathon pace, and then repeat the session.
11. 'Structured' fartlek: warm up, then run hard for five minutes at 5K pace, recovering with a five-minute jog. Alternate in this manner for a total of 30 minutes, then warm down. As the weeks pass, reduce the recovery jog to toughen the session, at first down to four minutes, and eventually to just one.
12. 4 x 400m (or 4 x 70-90 seconds) at slightly faster than 10K pace, with one-minute recoveries, then a three-minute rest, followed by 2-3 x 2-3K, with a four- to five-minute recovery between each rep. Finish with another 4 x 400m.
13. Simply try to run a negative split on an out-and-back run. That means run faster on the way back. Try three miles out at 70-80 per cent effort, returning at 80-90 per cent.

14. 3-5 x 1200m at 5K pace, with recovery jogs of about a minute less than the time it took you to do the rep.
15. Run five to six miles, alternating two- to three-minute bursts at 10K pace, with a 60- to 90-second jog recovery between each.
16. Run a mile on the track at about 10 seconds per mile slower than your 10K pace; jog for two minutes, then run another mile, this time at 10K pace; jog for another two minutes, then do a last mile at about 10 seconds faster than 10K pace.
17. Run 800m at 10K pace, then jog for two minutes; run 400m at 5K pace, then jog for a minute; run 200m at your estimated one-mile race pace, then jog for 30 seconds; run 1000m at 10K pace, then jog for four minutes. Then repeat the session. Start with two sets, increasing to three later on.
18. Run eight reps of 200m two seconds faster per 200 than your 5K pace. Gradually increase the distance until you're running 600m reps at this speed. Then follow the same progression from 200-600m, this time at four seconds faster per 200m than 5K pace.
19. Find a flat stretch of trail or grass and jog for 10 minutes, then run at your mile pace for one minute and 40 seconds; slow down to a jog (don't walk), and recover for three minutes, then repeat another 100-second burst. Try four of these sessions to begin with, and gradually work up to 10. These 100s work on speed without the tedium of circling the track.
20. At a track, warm up, then run eight laps, alternating fast and slow 200s. The fast 200s should be hard, but not a full sprint – you'll soon learn just how fast (and slow) you need to go. Each week add an extra lap until you run 12 fast/slow 200s.
21. Run 2 x 800m at 10K pace, with a two-minute recovery jog after each. Follow with 4 x 400m at 10K pace, with just a 60-second recovery jog between reps. After the fourth 400m, jog for 60 seconds, then do 800m at slightly faster than 10K pace; jog for two minutes, then do another 800m at the same pace.
22. 5 x 1000m: run the first 800m at your 10K race pace, and then accelerate to your 3K pace for the last 200m, with three-minute recovery jogs.
23. Long warm-up, followed by 4-5 x (2 x 1K). Eh? Well, once you've warmed up and run 1K at slightly faster than your 10-mile race pace, jog for two to three minutes, and then do another 1K fast. Recover for a mile at 60 per cent effort before repeating the 1K efforts. Finish with a long cool-down.
24. 10 x 500m: run the first 400m at your 3K pace, then the last 100m flat-out, with 200m slow recovery jogs.
25. 8 x 400m: run the first 200m of each rep at your mile pace, and then accelerate for the final 200m. Your recovery jogs should be 400m.
26. Run at marathon pace for five minutes, then increase your speed to 10K pace for one minute. Continue this five-minute/one-minute sequence until 30 minutes have elapsed. This session improves your speed and breaks up the monotony of a long run.
27. Here's a great session for distances above 10K, but particularly for the marathon. If you want to complete a marathon in three hours, 27 minutes, simply run 800m reps in three minutes and 27 seconds. If you aren't planning a marathon, then run them at 10-mile race pace. Warm up for 10 minutes then run the 800s. After each, jog for the same amount of time that it took you to complete the 800s. Add one 800 a week until you can run eight reps.
28. 3 x 1 mile of alternating fast strides over the straights and jogging fast around the bends, with 400m recovery jogs between reps.

Sessions For Advanced Runners (these might hurt a bit!)

1. 4 x 400m, accelerating over each 100m. So, the first 100m should be run at your 10K pace, the second at 5K pace, the third at 1500m pace, and the fourth at 800m pace. Take a slow 400m jog (three minutes) to recover. Follow these with 6 x 200m at 800m pace, with 20-second recoveries.
2. Start with a long, easy warm-up, then 5-8 x 1000m at 10-mile race pace, with 400m recovery jogs. Finish with a long cool-down.
3. Three sets of: 400m at your 3K pace, then a 30-second rest; 400m, 20-second rest; 400m, 10-second rest; 400m. Jog 400m in three minutes between each set.
4. Run four to five miles at a steady, moderate pace, and then run a mile, 1200m, 800m, 400m, 200m at increasing speeds. Rest for no more than 30-60 seconds between these intervals. This session improves your 'kick'.
5. Basically 2 x 4000m, but with a twist: each 4000m consists of hard reps of 400m, 300m, 200m, 100m, 400m, 300m, 200m, 100m. The 400s are run at 1500m pace, 300s at 800m pace, 200s at 400m pace, and the 100m is a sprint. At the end of each fast rep carry on running for the same distance at a steady pace. So, after the 100m rep, you run 100m steady, and then it's straight into the second fast 400m. After the first 4000m, jog for three minutes, and then repeat.