



# Speed Dial

All runners can get fit fast—and have a little fun—by playing with their pace **BY JASON R. KARP, PH.D.**

**G**ENERALLY SPEAKING, runners like structure. They like knowing where they're going and how fast they have to go. But occasionally throwing a rigid routine to the winds can be a boon not only for your fitness, but for your mental state as well. One of the most effective workouts for getting fit while having fun is the classic fartlek (go ahead, snicker). From the Swedish word for "speed play," these runs let you pick up the pace whenever you feel like it, run as fast as you wish, and recover for as long as you want. "You're not doing the same

thing over and over, but mixing it up by distance, pace, terrain, and recovery period," says Tony Coffey, head coach of the Impala Racing Team in San Francisco. "Fartleks get us back to running like we did as kids, treating it as play and not as work." Fartleks also boost your fitness, whether you're a beginner or a veteran racer. They engage many of the same energy systems as interval workouts—depending on how long and hard the efforts are, all runners can use them to build stamina for sustained efforts. Here's how to work a little play into your schedule.

## SPEEDWORK NEWBIES

When it comes to getting faster, "the main problem holding beginners back is the fear they have when their heart rates rise," says Paul Greer, coach of the San Diego Track Club and associate professor of health and exercise science at San Diego City College. Fartleks are a nonthreatening way to introduce yourself to faster-paced running; you alone—not a clock, plan, or coach—choose how



Include both long and short bursts of speed within the same workout session to tap into and work your full range of energy systems.

**RUN**  
BETTER

far and how fast you want to run. Whether it's as far as the next mailbox or as short as a five-second, all-out dash.

**FAST FUN** → "Beginners don't need to worry about total distance or pace since it's more important to learn to run faster than normal," says Coffey. "Just listen to your body and run accordingly. Over time, fitness and running-specific strength will improve." Start by randomly throwing in five or six efforts of varying lengths and intensities during a 30-minute run. Each week, add one or two such pickups or extend the length of each one. After three or four weeks, progress to running one minute hard and two minutes easy for a total of 21 minutes. Add one hard/easy combo every week until you're speed-playing for a total of 30 minutes per week.

## WEEKEND WARRIORS


Once you've been running for at least six months, fartleks can be a valuable tool for intermediate runners as they transition into formal speedwork and start thinking about racing. "Speedplay sessions help you practice 5-K to 10-K race efforts to prepare for upcoming races," says Greg McMillan, an online running coach who works with first-time runners to Olympians. They're also a good way for runners to ease back into harder workouts after an injury or layoff, says Coffey.

**FAST FUN** → Find a loop about 800 meters long. Alternate running one loop at 5-K pace with one at about 1:20 per mile slower than 5-K pace, suggests Coffey. "The lack of complete recovery between faster bursts teaches the body to recover more quickly," he says. "Psychologically, the variety within the workout keeps you

mentally engaged in what you're doing, which will give you more confidence in racing situations as you're more in tune with your body." You can alternate the previous workout with a session spent running two minutes hard and one minute easy, five to six times, suggests McMillan.

## SEASONED RACERS

"For advanced runners, speedplay sessions prepare the body and mind for more race-specific workouts that they'll do as they get closer to their goal race," says McMillan. At the same time, they provide a psychological break from the relentless grind of the track, and during the off-season, are a great way to incorporate speedwork without overdoing it.

**FAST FUN** → Run a descending ladder starting at five minutes hard followed by four minutes easy. Reduce each hard effort and recovery period by one minute. "Advanced runners should do this workout on the actual race course or on a course similar to what they will be racing," says Greer. "This will keep you more focused and increase your confidence for race day." Make it harder by running an up-and-down pyramid: Run one minute fast followed by one minute easy. Increase the hard effort and recovery period by one minute each until you reach five minutes hard. Follow that with four minutes easy and go back down the pyramid by reducing the fast efforts and recovery periods by one minute. "It's always best to run the last half of a race faster than the first half, and this workout simulates that type of race plan," says Greer. "As the pyramid progresses and the time intervals get shorter, the advanced runner should run the paces faster than race pace." 

# FOLLOW THE LEADER

Advice from the world's best runners



**ERIN DONOHUE, 27, of Haddon Heights, N.J., won New York City's Midnight Run 4-Mile (21:22) and New Balance Games Mile (4:28.92) in January.**

## 1 GET READY

"I prepare for hard workouts the same way I prepare for a race. Getting comfortable with the routine reduces the nervousness you feel on race day."

## 2 GET SETS

"Instead of doing crunches or pushups until I can't do any more, I do as many as I can in one minute. I'll rest then do a second or third set. This adds an aerobic element to strength work."

## 3 GET SWEATY

"I often wear tights, even when it's not that cold outside. Warm muscles perform better than cold muscles do."  
—BOB COOPER

VICTOR SAILER/PHOTORUN

# Time to Play

When—and for how long—to vary your pace in training

Runner Level	Frequency	Duration of speedplay
BEGINNER	Once a week	15 to 30 minutes
INTERMEDIATE	Once or twice a week	30 to 45 minutes
ADVANCED	Once or twice a week during off season	45 to 60 minutes

FARTLEKS DATE BACK TO 1937, WHEN SWEDISH COACH GÖSTA HOLMÉR DEVELOPED THEM AS PART OF SWEDEN'S MILITARY TRAINING.