Time To Rethink Your Marathon Training Program?

Turning the Tables

By Greg McMillan, M.S.

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A few years ago, I worked for Gabriele Rosa, arguably the world's greatest marathon coach. His athletes, mostly Kenyan, have won every major marathon on Earth. During my tenure under him, Rosa-coached athletes won world cross country titles, world track titles, Olympic medals and set numerous world and marathon course records. As of this writing, his top athlete, Paul Tergat, is the world record holder in the marathon (2:04:55: 4:46 per mile). As you might imagine, I learned a lot.

My job was to assist with Rosa's U.S.-based training camps — modeled after his successful Kenyan camps — in which he hoped to develop U.S. runners into world-class marathoners. After a couple of marathon training cycles, I realized that the U.S. athletes simply were not ready for the rigors of his marathon training program. I felt that if we created a "pre-camp" training program for them, they'd show up better prepared for the marathon-specific training phase.

When I discussed this with Rosa, I fully expected him to propose a program that would build the athletes' mileage (base building) as well as a strength phase prior to the marathon phase. WRONG. To my surprise, the pre-marathon phase was nothing like I expected. Instead it was all speed work. That's right — 200s, 400s, 800s, mile repeats, and so on. Traditional "track work" like you might find a 5K or 10K runner doing before a competitive season. Rosa's experience showed that it was first important to develop the athlete's speed so this would not be a limiting factor in the marathon training phase. The goal in marathon training is to fatigue the athlete with the duration of the workouts and not the speed, so speed needed to be developed first.

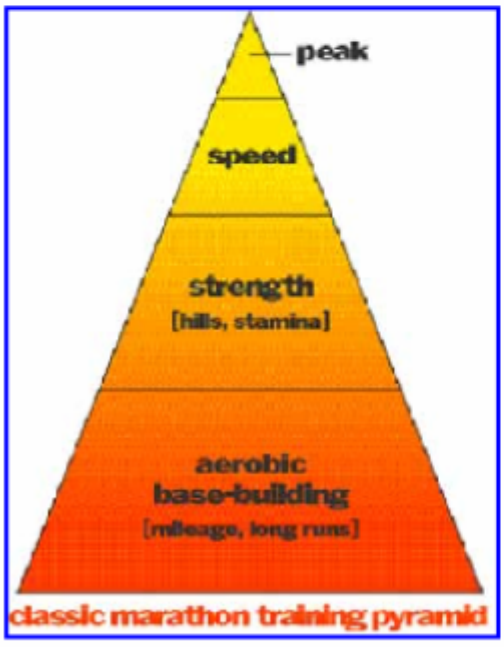

figure 1

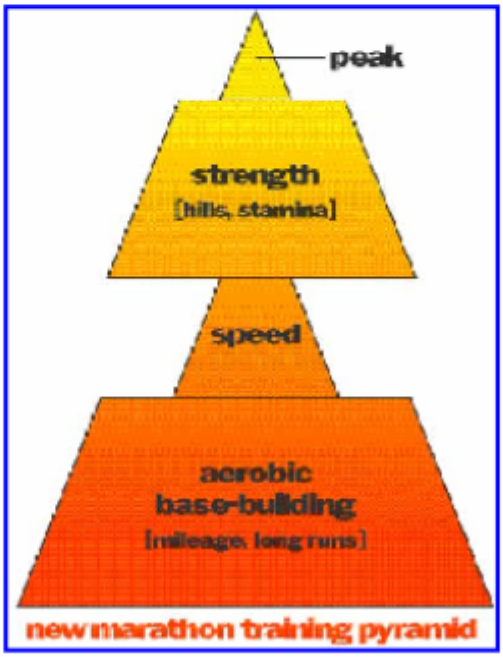

figure 2

Like most U.S. coaches, I was educated on what I'll call the "classic" marathon method. In this method, there is a traditional training pyramid **(figure 1)** where you first build an aerobic base with mileage, then transition to strength training with hills and stamina workouts, then finally to speed work before the peaking phase.

Rosa believes in this model with one exception: the strength phase and the speed phase should be flip-flopped for marathoners. I'll call this the "new" marathon training method. **(figure 2)**

Sample Pre-Marathon Training Phase

Week	Workout #1	Workout #2	Workout #3
Week 1	4–6 x 300m @ 85–90% of full effort with 1–2 minute recovery jog	6–8 x 800m @ sub-5K pace with 2–3 minute recovery jog	Long Steady Run: 14–16 miles
Week 2	5–6 x 200m @ 90–95% of full effort with 2–3 minute recovery jog	3–4 x 1 mile @ 5K pace with 2.5–3.5 minute recovery jog	Long Steady Run: 16–18 miles
Week 3	4–6 x 400m @ 85–90% of full effort with 1–2 minute recovery jog	4–5 x 1200m @ sub-5K pace with 2.5–3.5 minute recovery jog	Long Steady Run: 16–18 miles
Week 4	7–9 x 100m @ 95% of full effort with 1–2 minute recovery jog	8–10 x 400m @ sub-5K pace with 1–2 minute recovery jog	Long Steady Run: 16–18 miles

Comment: This program follows your normal base-building phase, but is before your six to eight week marathon-specific phase. In this phase, you work on speed two days per week and fill in the other runs with your normal maintenance runs and a long run. Take at least one day (and maybe two) between the speed sessions and ease into these workouts. This is stressful training so respect this and take good care of your body. Each workout can be performed as a fartlek run if no track is available or effort-based workouts are preferred. The goal is to increase speed, so make sure you run easily on your other workouts so that you can give a good effort in the speed workouts.

After discussing Rosa's pre-marathon program with him, I began to research the two methods to see where they came from and how and why they are different. I was curious not only to learn the history, but also whether this new approach worked for all runners or just a select few. And, should we toss the classic method or does it still offer benefit for certain marathoners?

It appears that this "new" method comes from Europe (and most likely Eastern Europe from training theorists like Tudor Bompa from Romania, the guru of periodization). The new method follows the original logic of our classic model, but implements it specifically for the marathon.

Training theory dictates that exercise programs be set up so that at the start. the athlete works on general conditioning (aerobic base and strength/hills for runners), then gradually moves to more and more race-specific training as the race nears. Since we inherited our classic method from track, this last race-specific training meant that track training — fast repetitions and lung-busting intervals — occurred near the key meets (the peak).

For the marathon, however, our "race-specific training" isn't fast speed work but is more stamina-oriented training: tempo runs, lactate threshold workouts, marathon goal pace runs, and so on. Therefore, in this new method of marathon training, we rearrange the training phases slightly. You build your base, then work on speed, followed by stamina, before peaking for the marathon. The more race-specific training, stamina training, moves closer to the event. This is a subtle but important change.

Theory is fine, but how does it work in practice? Rosa certainly had positive results using this model and we began to have better results with the U.S. runners. But, that was with elite runners. What about regular competitive athletes like you and me? Will this new method work better for us? I was in a position to find out.

Over the last four years, I implemented this new method with runners who span the spectrum of ability — beginning marathoners to marathon champions. Others are experimenting as well: In a recent interview, Brad Hudson, coach of Olympians Dathan Ritzenhein and Shayne Culpepper, mentioned that with this subtle rearrangement of phases, former national marathon champion Scott Larson was able to reach a new level in his marathoning.

Another Option: The Volume Method

While the classic method and the new method may work for 90-95 percent of marathoners, there are some athletes who seem to fit another method—the volume method. For these runners, speed before stamina or stamina before speed matters not. Much less emphasis is placed on specific workouts as the accumulation of miles is the key to their success.

I have coached athletes who simply lacked speed and no matter how much they worked on it, only marginal improvements in speed could be made. For this type of athlete, the best plan of attack is simply to work on your strength, which is your strength. Volume of training becomes numero uno.

Examples from the past include many of our great American marathoners from the late 1960s who simply ran a lot of miles. None of those training miles were necessarily fast by today's standards, but the athletes still won races, made Olympic teams and achieved times that most current American runners would be happy to call their own. Today, many Asian marathoners use the volume approach—the Japanese in particular. The Japanese coaches and athletes with whom I have spoken are matter-of-fact about it. They know their athletes have no speed so they don't worry about it. They overwhelm the competition with endurance. And who can argue with them? They dominate championship marathons like the World Championships and Olympics.

Pre-Marathon Training Phase

Here's what a pre-marathon speed phase looks like. It lasts between four and six weeks and follows your normal base-building phase, but is before a typical six to eight week marathon-specific phase. For most competitive runners who can handle two speed workouts per week plus a long run, it includes one speed workout using short distances (100 meters to 400 meters), run very fast with long recoveries, and one speed workout using longer repeats (400 meters to one mile), run at sub-5K race pace. Mileage for the pre-marathon phase is typically about 10-20 percent lower than the mileage level you will run in the marathon-specific phase.

If speed work is your nemesis, or if you find speed work especially hard on your body, or you have limited time for training, then just run one workout per week **(see Lynn's example below)** and ease into the workouts. If speed is your forte, then jump into this phase with gusto.

When using a pre-marathon phase like this, I recommend that you shorten your marathon-specific training phase by two to four weeks. I find that a proper pre-marathon phase followed by your usual marathon-training phase will likely lead to an early peak. You'll find that you don't need as many marathon-specific workouts to get into marathon race shape so plan for a few less total weeks of preparation before your marathon.

Front, Middle and Back-of-the-Pack Success

On the following pages are the pre-marathon training programs of three real-life athletes who are representative of most runners. These athletes utilized this new method of marathon training to achieve great improvements in their marathon times. Their examples can be applied to your own training for your next marathon. In all three cases, the training listed prefaced their normal marathon training program except that the marathon training program was shortened by two to four weeks.

Kelly Lilljeblad Keane: 2005 Houston Marathon Champion: 2:32:27
Gary: 3:21 Marathoner
Lynn: 3:51 Marathoner

(Refer to workout schedules at end of article)

Better Pre-Marathon Training Equals Better Marathon Training

Who Should Try the New Method?

- Runners who are not having success with the classic method.
- Runners who find that during marathon training, they get "stuck" at a pace and simply can't go any faster.
- Runners who have trouble finishing a longer marathon training program due to injury or burn-out.
- Runners who feel they are more "speedster" than "the-longer-the-better" runners. If your performance at shorter races far exceeds your performance at longer races, then the new method may work for you.

One of the great benefits I see in the new model is that it can shorten your marathon phase. I find that the better job you do (meaning the more speed developed) in the pre-marathon phase, the shorter the marathon phase can be. This is extremely helpful to competitive runners because many marathoners are simply worn out mentally by the time the race approaches. Too often you hear them say, "I just can't wait for it to be over!" This is NOT what a coach wants to hear as the race nears. A shorter marathon program avoids this problem (as well as some of the injuries that can come with a long marathon training buildup).

I also find that the better job you do in the pre-marathon phase, the more benefit you will get out of the marathon-specific training. As Rosa suggested, the goal is to raise your speed so that in the marathon workouts you are never limited by your speed, but instead you are fatigued simply by the duration of the workouts. Sounds like the marathon, doesn't it? It's not that you can't run marathon pace, it's simply that you can't sustain marathon pace. A smart pre-marathon program ensures this will not happen. You'll be able to do more and higher-quality marathon-specific training because you won't be limited by your lack of speed.

Warning: This is NOT for Every Runner

Despite my initial training in the classic method, I'm finding more success with this new method than I did using the classic method. With that said, it would be incorrect to suggest that this new model is the answer for every

The Shorter/Salazar Method

While we may call this a "new" method for marathon training, it really isn't new and it isn't even new to American marathoning. Many coaches talk about the (Frank) Shorter/(Alberto) Salazar Method of

marathoner. In fact, I have found that a modified new model or even the classic model works better for certain types of runners. Any runner who is continuing to improve using the classic method should stick with what works. Any runner who finds that simply doing more mileage and less speed work produces the best results (see Exceptions to the Rule sidebar) will likely not have success with this new method. Any runner who gets hurt doing speed work or finds that too much speed work causes overtraining should be very careful when implementing this new approach. In this case, I usually recommend a modified new program that works on speed, but with only one speed workout per week and maybe for only two to three weeks.

Ain't It Fun?!

You'd think that with nearly 50 years of competitive marathoning behind us, marathon training would be cut and dried, but it's not. We are all different, with different strengths and weaknesses. The best we can do is think about what works and does not work for us. We can experiment with new approaches when other approaches aren't working. We can learn from expert coaches and successful athletes and modify their lessons to match our own abilities. With commitment and dedication (and more than a bit of luck), you'll toe the line in your next marathon better prepared than ever.

marathoning as synonymous with the method described in this article. Both Shorter and Salazar were exceptional track runners who also carried their talents to the marathon. As track runners, they frequently raced on the European track circuit throughout the summer — thus getting plenty of speed work during this time. After completing their summer track campaigns in August/September, they are reported to have taken their track-honed speed and added a few weeks of higher mileage, long runs and marathon pace runs prior to their fall marathons. This pattern fits perfectly with the "new" method, so it's not so new after all.

It has been widely reported that Salazar continues with this idea and requires his Oregon Project Team to first achieve a fast 10K before moving to the marathon. This method led to Dan Browne not only running a very fast 5K and 10K but also becoming national marathon champion and making the U.S. Olympic marathon team.

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Kelly Liljeblad Keane: 2005 Houston Marathon Champion: 2:32:27

Pre-Marathon Phase	Workout #1	Workout #2	Workout #3	Workout #4
Week 1	Fartlek Workout: 10–15 x 1 minute at sub-5K pace with 1 minute jog recovery	Fartlek Workout: 4–5 x 5 minutes at sub-5K pace with 2–3 minutes jog recovery	Stride Workout: 10–12 x 20–25 seconds at 5K down to mile race pace with 1 minute jog recovery	Long Run: 120 minutes
Week 2	Fartlek Workout: 10–15 x 1 minute at sub-5K pace with 1 minute jog recovery	Fartlek Workout: 5–6 x 2 minutes at sub-5K pace with 1 minute jog recovery	Progression Run: Easy Run with last 10 minutes at half marathon effort.	Long Run: 120 minutes
Week 3	Stride Workout: 10–12 x 20–25 seconds at 5K down to mile race pace with 1 minute jog recovery	Fartlek Workout: 6–8 x 3 minutes at sub-5K pace with 90 seconds jog recovery	Fartlek Workout: 10–15 x 1 minute at sub-5K pace with 1 minute jog recovery	Long Run: 120 minutes
Week 4	Stride Workout: 10–12 x 20–25 seconds at 5K down to mile race pace with 1 minute jog recovery	Fartlek Workout: 4–5 x 5 minutes at sub-5K pace with 2–3 minutes jog between	Progression Run: Easy Run with last 10 minutes at half marathon effort	Long Run: 120 minutes
Comments: In each example, only the key workouts of the week are listed. The athletes add additional maintenance runs to achieve their weekly mileage goals.				

Kelly is certainly not the norm, but her training can provide some insight. One thing you will notice is that since she is a full-time runner, she's able to fit four hard workouts into her training week. Most athletes can't do this and I don't recommend trying it unless you have great biomechanics, only eat, sleep and run, and can have frequent massage, chiropractic or other rehab. Since Kelly is a former track All-American, we use fartlek workouts since she becomes too time-focused with track workouts and we don't want this yet—I would rather have her run by effort. She pushes hard enough in this training already and on the track she can sometimes strain as she chases times. Her mileage during this training phase is usually 80-95 miles per week, whereas during her marathon-specific training she runs 100-120 miles per week.

Gary: 3:21 Marathoner

Pre-Marathon Phase	Workout #1	Workout #2	Workout #3
Week 1	Fartlek Workout: 10–12 x 1 minute at sub-5K pace with 1 minute jog recovery	Speed Workout: 4–5 x 1 mile with 800m jog recovery	Long Steady Run: 14–16 miles
Week 2	Sprint Workout: 6 x 200m @ 90–95% of full effort with 400m jog recovery	Speed Workout: 6–8 x 800m with 400m jog recovery	Long Steady Run: 16–18 miles
Week 3	Fartlek Workout: 10–12 x 1 minute at sub-5K pace with 1 minute jog recovery	Fartlek Workout: 4–5 x 6 minutes at 5K–10K pace with 3 minutes jog recovery	Long Steady Run: 16–18 miles
Week 4	Stride Workout: 6 x :45 fast with 90 seconds jog recovery	Fartlek Workout: 6–8 x 3 minutes at sub-5K pace with 90 seconds jog recovery	Long Steady Run: 16–18 miles
Comments: If Gary is at home, then we often use the track for pre-marathon workout #2. If Gary is traveling then we use fartlek runs for pre-marathon workout #2.			

I think Gary is representative of most competitive runners. He balances work, family and other life commitments with his 40 to 60 miles per week. He's tough, dedicated and committed and his pre-marathon program is a good example for athletes in the Boston-qualifying time range. You can use the track or you can perform the workouts as fartlek (or effort-based) runs. With Gary we use both, depending on his travel schedule. Gary and I started working together when he was a 1:46 half marathoner. Using this pre-marathon program along with my marathon program, Gary was able to double his half marathon best and run 3:32 in his debut marathon. With another training cycle, he lowered his personal best to 3:21:51. Maybe he could have done the same thing using the classic method but this works well for him. He stays healthy, runs personal bests at shorter distances and is continuing to improve at the marathon.

Lynn: 3:51 Marathoner

Pre-Marathon Phase	Workout #1	Workout #2
Week 1	Fartlek Workout: 4–5 x 5 minutes at 5K–10K pace with 3 minutes jog recovery	Long Steady Run: 14–16 miles
Week 2	Fartlek Workout: 6–8 x 3 minutes at sub-5K pace with 90 seconds jog recovery	Long Steady Run: 14–16 miles
Week 3	Fartlek Workout: 4–5 x 5 minutes at 5K–10K pace with 3 minutes jog recovery	Long Steady Run: 16–18 miles
Week 4	Fartlek Workout: 6–8 x 3 minutes at sub-5K pace with 90 seconds jog recovery	Long Steady Run: 16–18 miles
Comments: For Lynn, we found that one workout and a long run is the best schedule for her. Two workouts per week plus a long run have caused injury in the past.		

Lynn shows what dedication and a smart training plan can do. She started near the back of the pack (4:40 marathon) and with consistent training over the last three years, she reached her pinnacle achievement of qualifying for Boston (running 3:57 and following this up with a 3:51 at Boston). She runs 30 to 45 miles per week and balances training with work and family life. Her pre-marathon program is a great example of how runners who often don't think of themselves as competitive runners can make great improvements in their marathon times, especially when they lack the time or the ability to run a lot of miles. The new method was also valuable to Lynn because she often felt that traditional marathon training programs dragged out too long.