Coach and Athlete Development Programme

Not just another race - 10k and how to run it quicker

How many of you treat a 10K race as "just another race"? No need to do any special training – its only 10k! Pure and simple the distance is treated as "just another race" far too easily. This is strange, as the track version is an Olympic event and has a world record. It's a race distance with a great pedigree and one that is a challenge to be targeted and not treated as "just another race".

Of course, we have numerous couch to 5k and improver to 10k programmes available, so it is an aspiration for many to complete the distance. But is the goal to be able to run 10k or learn to race the event?

The ability to run a fast 10k is a perfect springboard for athletes who want to run quick times over longer distances. It is akin to track athletes who underpin their training for 3000m or 5000m by running fast times for 1,500m.

A good example is Steve Moneghetti who represented Australia at four consecutive Olympics in the marathon with a best of 2.08, and who is the oldest man to have run a road 10k in under 30 minutes. He suggests that running a good 10k is the basis of running fast at longer distance including the marathon.

So, whether you are a seasoned runner looking for a challenge or someone just getting to 10k distance, the question should be: "How can I run the 10k more quickly?"

The 10k (or 6.2 miles) is a classic distance, and certainly one which can be targeted for quicker times with the correct training schedule as part of an annual plan (see www.lran.org.uk/coaching/coaches-club for information on annual planning).

So, how do we go about improving times and setting a good standard for the ability level of ourselves or our athletes?

Components of running a faster 10k

The first ingredient to running a faster 10k race is to do plenty of over-distance work so that it is well within the capabilities of the athlete. For the seasoned runner this will not be an issue as many athletes at club level regularly run distances in excess of the distance in training.

The second component is integrating specific and programmed speed sessions into training. So, what we have to decide is how far and how fast your athletes need to run to achieve effective outcomes without becoming fatigued and /or injured?

What I suggest is that you build a plan which averages out at 10k per run over the course of a week (e.g. 15k + 10k + 8k + 7k = 40k; divided by 4 runs = 10k per run). So, for example, if your/your athlete is running four times per week, an ideal arrangement would be a long run of around 15k, which matches the principle of the longest run being approximately 1.5x the race distance. We then have one run at 10K and two others of around 6k and 7k respectively, i.e. one run at race distance and two at around 75% of race distance. This programme builds a strong endurance base so athletes can be confident of making the distance on race day whilst achieving the desired race pace. As the training programme is developed over time, it continues to be underpinned by this principle.

Faster or too fast?

I hear many club athletes who speak of "doing speed sessions". However, when asked how and what these are geared to achieve they are unsure. We can address this issue by looking at good examples of how "speed work", or faster pace work, will work towards our 10k goal through sessions that improve speed endurance – the ability to run faster for a longer period of time. First of all, I am assuming that most people have access to a track. Although not crucial, it is useful for some, if not all, speed-based sessions as you are working on an accurately measured surface. If no track is available, you can, instead, measure training routes which may not be entirely accurate but will provide a good indicator of improved fitness and speed.

One note of caution here, most inexperienced runners will do their speed work at a far faster pace than is needed. As I have written before, this ensures only sore muscles the next day and possible missed days training through fatigue, as well as the increased incidence of injury. So, if you/your athletes are new to speed work, don't get too tied up with running flat out. A good first session to get used to running more

quickly than normal, while also learning to pace correctly, is to use a track or mark out a route of a similar nature, and then jog the bends and run fast on the straights (or the other way round if you feel inclined). If, after five laps, you/your athletes finish the session feeling tired but also feeling that they could have done more, they are about there. If they fail to complete the five laps, the pace was too fast, or, the recoveries were too short. To start bringing some science to the session, running around 10% quicker than 10k race pace is a good early indicator.

If you are working with a group and only have basic facilities, such as a park, you can still run the same session in an inclusive way by setting out different turning points. So, for example, the least experienced athletes might turn after 250m, whilst experienced or faster runners may carry on to around 350m metres, then jog back and meet with the other runners ready to go again.

As an example of a faster pace session (if you have a track, well and good, but if not measure out approximately 800m in 100m increments) try the following session:

500m fast, 300 jog, 400 fast, 400 jog, 300 fast, 500 jog, 200 fast, 600 jog then back up again. This is one set.

Over the weeks, and I suggest a 12-week cycle to build to a peak for the event, this session can be built upon to achieve two full sets, which, of course, meets one of the target runs of the week as this would be just over 6000m.

Obviously, this is a basic plan and coaches will be able to devise and vary their own plans using the criteria described earlier in the article. For those who are looking to apply some science to their plan, below are some target training times across various distances for 35, 40 and 50 minute 10k runners, based on the Jack Daniels Vdot schedules.

Minutes and seconds unless otherwise shown	35 min 10k	40 min 10k	50min 10k
Easy run per mile	5.49	7.59	8.46
1000m Threshold pace	3.26	4.07	4.42
400m interval	76 sec	91sec	1.52
400m repeat (Reps)	70sec	85 sec	1.46

Race Strategy/ Negative splits

Finally, let's have a quick look at race strategy for club runners and less experienced runners competing in a road 10k. These basic principles apply to all races, of course, unless the athlete is at the elite end.

If it is the first 10K for someone fairly new to running, the key is to run evenly. An over-exuberant start will mean an inevitable slowing towards the finish, or indeed worse. If the target time is 60 minutes, for example, the aim would be to pass the kilometre markers at six-minute intervals. Then, if training is paying off, the pace can be picked up to finish strongly.

More experienced club runners should play to their strengths. If they have good speed but are lacking in endurance, perhaps due to a disrupted training plan, they should hold back slightly until 5k is passed then start to gradually pick up the pace. If the reverse is the case, then obviously the opposite is the favoured option.

The key words in distance running nowadays are "negative splits" which means simply to run the second half of a race quicker than the first. To get the best out of a 10k, a 40-minute runner should aim for a maximum negative split of one minute - so 20.30 for the first 5k and 19.30 for the second half. The slower the pace of the competitor the larger the optimum negative split - up to a maximum of 2 minutes. For experienced runners who have trained well the recommendation is to build a time buffer of around 10 seconds in the first 3k so running slightly quicker (around 3 seconds per kilometre) than target pace and then cruise in at even pace until the final two kilometres or so when, if confidence is high, a push towards a new PB can be established!

The 10k is not just another race, plan for it, respect the classic distance and plan to peak at the right time to achieve targets and goals.

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