

Hellebuyck often runs a long cool down after his races in order to get a high mileage day in.

particularly as you approach your peak (hence the old running adage, “when you’re in your best shape ever, you’re close to being in your worst shape”). Or fate can throw in outside conditions that make optimum performance impossible regardless of fitness—ask any of the women who ran in the freak February heat wave of the 2000 Olympic Trials Marathon.

Planning the Plateau

For the most part, Plateau Training is not all that different from other programs, except during the final phases, and should seem reassuringly familiar.

It begins with a mileage buildup of several months during which a runner lays the aerobic foundation that will carry through the extended racing season later. Actual mileage will be determined by the time available and the planned competitive distances, but some workouts of two hours or more would not be excessive. Indeed, Hank Berkowitz of the Central Park Track Club recalls a season when he trained with teammates preparing for the New York City Marathon, but then ran only shorter races in the fall. “I set PR’s in a bunch of them, just because the distance work had made me so strong.” This recalls the preparatory workouts made famous by Arthur Lydiard’s charges, who trained like marathoners while preparing for races as short as half a mile. During this period occasional mid-run pickups or strides at the conclusion should be performed a few times a week to maintain one’s turnover and range of motion.

This is also the time to build strength and flexibility, either in the gym or by cross-training when the weather isn’t conducive to running. Colleen De Reuck, one of the most prolific and successful road racers for the past decade, has added Pilates to her usual weight training and

occasional cross-country skiing days during this buildup phase.

In the second half of this phase begin incorporating what El Mostafa Nechchadi, coach of Catherine Ndereba, calls “power workouts.” Hills are the traditional choice, but tempo runs of gradually increasing duration are an alternative. Races should generally be avoided, since the planned competitive season will be lengthy.

Mixing Things Up

So far, this is nothing different from typical training plans, but as the beginning of serious racing approaches, things change. Whereas most plans are sequential, that is, emphasizing one type of workout—endurance (long runs), tempo runs (extended sessions just slower than 10K pace), anaerobic threshold (AT) or VO₂ max work (short repeated distance with controlled rest intervals), repetitions (short fast repeats with full recovery rest periods)—during a particular phase before moving on to the next, Plateau Training utilizes them all more or less simultaneously (although not in the same session). Exercise physiologist and coach Jack Daniels advocates rotating through the four types of workouts on a 12 day cycle. “The problem is 12 doesn’t divide evenly by a seven day week, so you’ve got to do some adjusting,” he says. Daniels recommends plugging in planned races first, then fitting the other workouts in around them. “You can count a race in the 5 to 10K as a really good interval day,” he says. “A longer race can replace a threshold run, while a short race could take the place of a repetition or AT workout.”

No matter how diligently these various workouts are performed, it may take several actual races until you are fully accustomed to the unique demands, mental as well as physical, of actual competition. Thus, it may be useful to run several transition or practice races before the focal racing season begins. To prepare for the opening race of the Westport Summer Series in late June, I’ll enter three or four of the 5K’s that seem to be as numerous in the spring as daffodils, and arrive at the first Series event “race hardened.”

Once the main competitive season is under way, training becomes fairly simple and routine, and aside from the hard workouts between races, consists of easy runs for recovery and aerobic base maintenance.

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Plateau Basics

Buildup (8-16 WEEKS)

Aerobic fitness base building. One long run per week increasing to two-plus hours. Strength and flexibility training two-three times/week. Cross training or easy aerobic runs of up to an hour on other days. Begin to add hills or "power runs" near the end of phase.

Transition (6-8 weeks)

Preparing to race. Long run and auxiliary training can be reduced slightly. Increase volume and intensity of power runs, and begin to add some faster paced running (fartlek, pickups, strides) to some workouts to develop leg speed. Tempo runs, AT workouts

and a few "transition races" can be added toward the end (see text for explanation of terms).

Competitive Plateau (4 weeks-4 months)

Weekly or bi-weekly racing. Two mid-week workouts of tempo run, AT workouts or repetitions, based on what energy systems will be stressed in previous and upcoming race—work on what the race does not. Try to maintain aerobic base with a long warmdown after the race and/or a long run the following day. Easy/no running the day or two before racing. Minimal strength training but flexibility work should be continued.

A potential concern during this time is the gradual erosion of this base. A long aerobic run can be done on weekends when there is no race planned, or on Sunday after a Saturday race. If that's not possible, take a page from the training log of Eddy Hellebuyck, one of the most prolific racers on the national circuit. "After a race I'll go off for a long cool down, sometimes six miles or more, until I feel like my blood sugar's exhausted and I'm out of energy." For Hellebuyck, this has the same training effect as a longer run, with the added benefit of a sustained period of intense effort from the race. "Combining races and long runs can be a great idea," echoes Daniels.

Holding the High Ground

Once you've achieved optimal, if perhaps not maximal, racing condition, the question becomes how to maintain and extend it beyond the usual two to three week peak of most programs.

According to Daniels, a study to determine how to achieve such a peak indicated that the single greatest factor was a 50 to 60 per cent reduction in training volume while maintaining most of the intensity. Therefore, keeping your training at a consistent, moderate level should enable you to continue racing well for an extended period. "I really believe you can hold a peak for six months," says Jerry Macari, owner of Manhattan's Urban Athletics, and the New York Road Runners Master of the Year in 2001, an honor he won by dint of a string of stellar races from

February through October. As long as mileage doesn't drop drastically and the intensity remains consistent—Macari calls midweek tempo runs and repeat 1,000's his season-long "bread and butter" workouts—race times should stay strong as well.

In the day or two preceding a race, training should be fairly minimal. Hellebuyck will often travel two days before, then spend the day before watching TV in his hotel. Nechchadi feels that a light dose of speedwork—200's or 400's—two days before a race isn't harmful, although individual experience should be the final guide.

Over an extended racing season there may be some fluctuation in performances, due to weather or health. "You have to listen to your body," advises Kim Griffin, one of New York City's best and most consistent competitors, whose job as a hospital physician sometimes leaves her with time or energy constraints. "If you can't do a workout, skip it, don't try to cram it in to make it up—that's a sure way to get hurt."


If the season is long enough, a planned competitive hiatus of several weeks will allow your physical and mental batteries to recharge. After beginning his racing in late winter, Hellebuyck culminates the first half of his season by running the Kona Marathon in Hawaii, then does nothing but "play golf and walk on the beaches" for a few weeks before he returns to the road wars. "The break makes me hungry to race again," he says.

Indeed, the mental demands of an extended season may be almost as taxing

as the physical. Hellebuyck says it's important to have a motivating goal to carry you through the occasions when you'd rather sleep in than go to a race. But if this "don't care" attitude continues more than a week, you may have played out your hand for the season; cash in your chips and begin preparing for the next one.

Ironically, racing frequently can be mentally easier than the anxiety produced by the "all your eggs in one basket" mindset of peak performance training. "It takes away the pressure, and you generally run better when you're relaxed," says Griffin, who ran her first sub-17 minute 5K in almost a decade at a race where she "wasn't expecting anything." Peter Gambaccini, who holds the career record for wins at Westport and was also a top Central Park racer in the late 80's, recalls being amazed by "the nonchalance I'd exhibit before races, yawning and chatting, then going out and running great times."

Unless you're relatively new to racing, don't expect to set personal bests using Plateau Training (novices may find that the lengthy structured training may produce PR's, particularly if they haven't done much formal work before). And it probably isn't the best way to prepare for a marathon (although as noted, marathon preparation may be an excellent buildup for extended racing). In striving to cover 26 miles, or shorter distances faster than you've ever done before, you are best served by a schedule of workouts based on progression and periodization culminating in a peak performance.

But if you're a runner who likes to race often, and are willing to devote a few months preparation in order to do so at a higher level than simple fitness running has achieved, make the climb to your racing plateau. The view may not be as stunning as from the top of the mountain, but you'll be able to enjoy it a lot longer. 

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KIM GRIFFIN

Preparing for the season—not the race—of your life