

Rustbust to Peak Race Shape

Why you need tune-up races

By Mackenzie Lobby

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For every runner who loves to race, there's her reluctant counterpart, the one who seems to line up only after a stint of perfect training coincides with just the right alignment of the stars. While the serial racer might never reach her potential because of overexposure, the overly occasional racer also often falls short, because of not enough exposure to the physical and mental demands that occur only in a race.

Anyone hoping to pop a PR needs tune-up races. They're the rustbusters that teach your body and mind to race effectively. They're the place to practice your race, before, during, and after the actual event.

This approach relies heavily on the principle of specificity: To perform well, you must engage in relevant training leading up to your race. As Greg McMillan puts it, "The most race-specific workout you can do is a race. When we pin the number on, something changes." By anticipating and practicing this transformation during tune-up races, you put yourself on a vector leading towards success in your big goal race.

Psychology 101

Every time we learn a new skill or are introduced to new information, our brains grow new neural pathways to use and access the new data. In the book [Deep Survival: Who Lives, Who Dies, and Why](#), Laurence Gonzales chronicles the neuroscience behind the decisions we make in situations in which we have little time to actually "think." While he gives examples of mountain climbing emergencies and river rafting debacles, there is relevance to running and racing. We enter similar states of mind in both life-or-death situations and competitive situations. We go on autopilot and fall back on basic instincts. In these circumstances, we rely on the neural pathways we've already established.

Gonzales writes, "When a decision to act must be made instantly, it is made through a system of emotional bookmarks. The emotional system reacts to circumstances, finds bookmarks that flag similar experiences in your past and your response to them." When a runner finds it's possible to push through pain in a race, a "beacon of incentive," or bookmark, is established. These bookmarks are created through training the mind, and hence the body, to do what you want it to do without thinking. In tune-up races, you re-access the bookmarked data, thus strengthening those neural pathways.

The racing mindset is crafted through nurturing these specific pathways. Sports psychologists refer to the optimal race mentality as the "flow state." In 1975, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi described this phenomenon as a psychological state in which all distractions fall away and the individual is totally engaged in the task at hand. It's characterized by unwavering focus, and in the case of running, the ability to run through pain and discomfort. It's what we feel when we're "in the zone." With some racing practice, we can teach ourselves to more readily slip into this competitive flow state, thus bookmarking the action.

It all starts with the days and hours leading up to the race. Jim Taylor, performance psychologist and sub-3:00 marathoner, says, "I'm a big believer in developing prerace routines. In lead-up races you can test out your routine." McMillan explains how he teaches this concept to elite runners: "Every athlete has a standardized pre-workout and pre-race routine. That's what I want them to get comfortable with so that on race morning when they're nervous and excited, they can just sort of go brain dead before the race." That ability to go "brain dead" is a way of describing the flow state. With enough tune-up races, you're more effortlessly able to slip into the racing zone.

McMillan suggests that tune-up races can prepare a runner for unforeseen race circumstances. He says that the rustbusters help you to "tolerate some of the stressors that can happen on race morning. You can't park as close as you thought or there aren't enough port-a-johns. If your routine is set and comfortable, I think you are better able to handle any unforeseen change from your ideal prerace routine." It's all about embracing the things you can control and letting go of the ones you can't.

Kristen Nicolini Lehmkuhle of Team USA Minnesota knows this routine well. The 1:12 half marathoner says, "Every race, you have to deal with some stressful situation, whether you forgot your spikes or the weather is bad. Each time you get on the line you become a little more relaxed because you've already gone through it." That's just not something you get from an everyday workout.

The benefits of tune-up races don't end there. McMillan explains that these races train a runner to "get used to the feeling they're going to have in a race that you don't quite get in training. " While race-specific workouts are important, "the reality is you can't race like you train, because races matter," says Taylor. Tune-up races "prepare your mind for that difference between competition and training. The more you do it, the more familiar you are with it."

McMillan adds, "A big part of training is to get your brain used to discomfort. No more so than in a race are you exposed to that ever-increasing discomfort that you have to deal with. That's really the purpose of training and racing—to help the brain get used to those feelings." Experience shows that a runner's pain threshold occurs on a sliding scale. Practice races can help slide that threshold upwards, bookmarking it for future reference.

Physiology 101

While tune-up races assist in the psychological "bookmarking" of the racing experience, they also help you physiologically. McMillan explains that "from an energetic standpoint, from the biomechanical to the biochemical, all of those different systems are very important in these tune up races."

The energy system that's worked depends on the length and intensity of the tune-up race. "Races that typically last less than 20-30 minutes are much more challenging to the aerobic capacity or the VO₂ max system. From 30 minutes to an hour and a half, that's more the lactate threshold being challenged," says McMillan. He goes on to explain that different races elicit varying stimuli. For instance, if you're training for a longer distance, such as a marathon, you will want to do both VO₂ max and lactate threshold work. He suggests working a 5K or 10K race into your training to really blow out the cobwebs. For your lactate threshold work, you might choose to do a half marathon as a tune-up.

Nicolini Lehmkuhle adds, "There is something to be said for pushing your body to the limit. In training sometimes you want to train hard, but you also want to train smart. When you race, you put it all on the line. You want to go to the limit, to exhaustion. You need to do that a couple times to sharpen up for that main race." That's what rustbusting is all about.

Rustbuster Regimen



In McMillan's experience, racing helps racing. In fact, he says, "95 percent of the athletes I work with do better with lead-up or tune-up races in their training cycle." What's the best way to implement these races?

In his experience, both as a performance psychologist and a runner, Taylor emphasizes that "every race should have a purpose in preparing you for the goal race. It might mean maintaining a certain pace or running with a group of runners who you think you might be competing against."

In training for October's Twin Cities Marathon, Nicolini Lehmkuhle plans on doing several 10K races as well as the national 20K championships in September. For shorter goal races, she says, "I've always found if I'm training for a 10K I feel better and am sharper when I race down a couple times, meaning that I'll race a 3K or a 5K. It helps the 10k pace feel a little more relaxed. It gives me a little bit of confidence."

As Nicolini Lehmkuhle's summer racing schedule showcases, McMillan underscores the importance of purposeful training—that you should go into a tune-up race with a specific goal that is meant to further your training for your goal race. For instance, Nicolini Lehmkuhle will go into the 10K tune-up knowing it will be faster than her marathon pace, thus making her goal race feel less strenuous. The 20K will serve as a test for fitness and endurance.

Indeed, McMillan also talks about being purposeful in resting post-tune-up race. He reminds runners that it's "a more stressful training stimulus than your regular training. You need to remember to give your body time to recover and allow that training stimulus to be adapted into the body."

Hitting the Circuit

Like McMillan suggested, pinning that number on signifies a shift. "The importance of the day changes, maybe it's because we know we're going to be judged by others. Your name is going to be in the finishing results. You can't hide behind that. Something definitely changes."

Smart racing instincts are learned through that bookmarking process both psychologically and physiologically. Whether it's avoiding getting boxed in, running the tangents, or pushing through pain, Nicolini Lehmkuhle says, "you get better at all these things as you gain racing experience. The more you race, the more willing you are to take risks."

Tune-up races bookmark the flow experience and the rewards garnered from taking risks and achieving success in races. It's about "going brain dead" and knowing that you can deal with whatever race day throws at you because you already have shelved several racing volumes in your mental bookshelf. The neural pathways are established and the synapses are firing. As Nicolini Lehmkuhle puts it, "You can do things you didn't know you could do until you go out and actually race."

Theory Into Practice

Here are some suggestions for tune-up race schedules from Greg McMillan.

Training for a 5K

- Run four to five lead up 5Ks (2 or so each month).
- The last tune up race should be two weeks out from your goal race.

Training for a 10K

- Run one 10K and two to three 5Ks.
- The last tune up race should be three weeks out from your goal race.

Training for a Half Marathon

- Assuming you're doing 12-16 weeks training, run two or three races, which can be a combination of 5K, 8Ks, 10Ks, or 10-mile races.
- The last tune-up race should be 4-6 weeks out from your goal race.

Training for a Marathon

- Run a half marathon 4-6 weeks out and a 10K-half marathon 4-6 weeks before that.
- The last tune-up race should be 4-6 weeks out from your goal race.

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