

Training Talk - Holding back the years

Getting older is inevitable, but with the right training, you don't have to let your past catch up with you. - By Steve Smythe

The prognosis doesn't look good. For an ageing runner, PB might as well stand for 'premature baldness' as much as 'personal best.' With every passing birthday, be prepared for a decline in speed, flexibility, strength, stride-length, power, energy and, perhaps not surprisingly, motivation.

You are also likely to suffer more injuries and take longer to recover from them. And, to add insult to those injuries, race performances that feel as impressive as Hendrik Ramaala in New York will start to look more like a sweaty evening in Durban.

Most new runners, whatever their age, enjoy a honeymoon period when running feels easier as fitness levels consistently rise. Times tumble and improvement hurtles along at the pace of a Schumacher (Michael, not Ralf). Eventually though, typically seven to 10 years after first running, the rate of improvement declines, and performances plateau before that inevitable slowing kicks in.

The good news is that there are ways to fight the process of ageing and slowing without resorting to cosmetic surgery and a wig. A few proven techniques will help you think differently, reassess your running and slow down your rate of decline and, in some cases, reverse it.

1 Rest

It is possible that a reversal in good results could be a temporary blip. It may be the result of over-training and insufficient rest, or something as simple as the effects of dehydration or a virus. So before you decide you need to start training three times a day, take a step back with a few easy days and review your recent stress levels. Even if you feel strong and think that you can increase your training, it is always a good idea to have a few easy days before embarking on a new challenge.

In any case, if you are over 40, think about introducing more rest days into your schedule because recovery takes longer as you get older.

2 Longer and harder

OK, after luring you into a false sense of security by suggesting you rest more, the obvious way to get better results is to run more and harder. So while you may need more rest days, you will also have to increase the intensity and/or duration on the days you do run. Build up the mileage in small steps and make other gradual changes such as replacing a 'steady' 15km with a faster, 'tempo' 10km.

Improvement won't come overnight; you will have to be patient, but if you put the work in (and take sufficient rest), you will reap the rewards.

3 Change the speedwork

If you are serious about improving your running, then you are probably already doing some form of speedwork. If not, start. However, if despite a regular speed training session, times are still going in the wrong direction, you may need to alter the type of speedwork.

Try changing the recoveries either by decreasing them so you have less rest between each effort or occasionally increasing them so you can run the efforts faster. Or try something completely different. Instead of aiming for an even-paced session such as four repetitions of 1600m (1 mile or 4 laps around a track) with a five-minute recovery, run each mile differently. For the first one, try increasing the pace of each lap. For the second, try 400m fast, 200m steady, 400m fast, 200m steady, 400m fast. Run the third as eight sets of 50m steady, 150m fast. On the fourth, fast-stride the straight and slow-stride on the bends. This way, you will not only get used to changing pace, but at points you will be running faster than normal and at others keeping going although tired.

4 Mental attitude

If you don't think you can improve or hold your form, then the likelihood is you won't. However, while there isn't any harm in having a challenging long-term goal in the back of your mind, the key to retaining enthusiasm is to set yourself a short-term, achievable target.

It's also a good idea to start afresh every year as you get older - aim for annual bests rather than lifetime PBs. Be prepared to base your target on your current fitness and seek new challenges once you've reached your goal, but give yourself a short rest as a reward. Having the belief, determination and the right attitude can win the battle (if not the war) against the ageing process.

5 Regular sprints and drills

As you age, it is harder to retain speed and flexibility than to retain endurance. Therefore, it is wise to keep up or even introduce some short, fast running and sprint drills. On days when you have a medium or easy run planned, liven up the run by including four or five faster efforts over 100m to 150m, ideally on flat grass. Make sure you are thoroughly warmed up first. Start steadily, concentrate on staying relaxed and keeping good form and have a reasonable recovery time, such as one or two minutes. Gradually increase the pace so you are nearing top speed by the last effort.

As your stride shortens and loses cadence with age, it is also worth doing some sprint drills. Over 30m of soft, even ground, concentrate separately on high knees, kick-backs (your heels should almost touch your backside), long strides (an exaggerated stride), hops (land left, left, right, right, left, left, etc) and fast feet (hit the ground with short fast strides); do each one in turn, repeating twice. Aim for good technique and low impact at first until you are accustomed to the drills. These will enable you to increase the cadence and length of your stride, keep better form, get a better range of movement and therefore become faster.

6 Have more fun

If you've tried training harder, faster and smarter and the results are making the sacrifices seem a waste of time, it could be time for a change in perspective. Simply relax and enjoy it and forget all about times. There are many runners who can't run the times they used to. Some of them now may find motivation a struggle and think competition is a waste of time because they are so hung up on the past. That's fine: You don't have to be competitive to enjoy running. Take time away from races and just enjoy running for the sake of running. Then take part in a race without worrying about the time, just to see what you can do. While you might once have run, say, 40 minutes for 10K, there's no reason why you can't take satisfaction from running 45 minutes while still finishing well within the top half of most fields. You might be slower but you'll still be enjoying the thrill of taking part in one of the greatest of sports, and for your age you might even be relatively better.

7 Treat injuries quicker

One of the biggest causes of slowing race performances is missed training through injury. It might be a chronic injury that forces you to miss two months of running, a niggle that stops you doing speedwork or one that just requires three days off. Almost everyone picks up an injury at some point and unfortunately, as you get older, they can become more frequent and take longer to recover from. Something you might have been able to run through in the past may now require immediate treatment.

8 Change events

If the thought of becoming slower every year over 10km fills you with dread, then stop running the distance. Try events you've never previously focused on, either shorter or longer, or where times are less relevant, such as cross-country, trail or multi-terrain.

If you can swim or are willing to learn, triathlons provide a fresh challenge, as do adventure races or orienteering events. Be open-minded about the possibilities. Also, if you are over the age of 35 you might find the incentive of Masters competition motivates you to train harder and race better.

9 Change training partners

If it is geographically possible, vary your routes and also your training partners, or even join or change running clubs. Fresh routes or companions could be just the boost you need.