

Becoming a "Run/Walk" Athlete: for recreation, racing, or anything in between!

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As many of you know, I'm quite the vocal enthusiast for combining both running and walking in workouts. In fact in addition to my own "continuous running" and "continuous walking" workouts, I continue to include a number of run/walk routines that I've devised and refined over the years as part of my regular fitness activities. More over, I've also used these routines with good success for clients and students of mine as well. Not surprisingly, the benefits to this unique pairing, which I'll elaborate on below, are numerous. But I still find it surprising as to how seldom you encounter the notion that a run/walk arrangement can be adopted as a permanent format, rather than just a stepping stone to more ambitious running or as a "lighter" workout on the days a person doesn't feel like running continuously. It seems you're either in the



"walking" camp or you're in the "running" camp, everything else is transitional. Which is a shame, because there is a huge case to be made to become a committed "run/walk" athlete, where your aspirations can fully encircle making the most out of this valuable and adaptable structure, and strategies for improvement are just as numerous as with "regular" running.

So if you've ever toyed with adding some running to your weekly fitness lineup but are timid about taking on a full-fledged running program....or you've been a runner and are now looking into an alternative that's less stressful on your joints....or you're just looking to add some variety to your workouts and maybe help you shed some pounds in the process....read on! You may be the perfect candidate for what I sometimes call the "best of both worlds" program!

But first, some introductions: Mr. Benefits of Walking, meet Ms. Benefits of Running

By now, no one is a stranger to the idea that improving your health, fitness and enjoyment of life can be accomplished simply by getting out and walking. And why not? Walking is easy, convenient, and accessible, doesn't require equipment (other than a good pair of shoes), and can be done alone or used as a social time with a friend or spouse. You can walk fast or slow, up hills or on flat surfaces, at the mall, at a local park or on the treadmill. The benefits include increased calorie burning (translation: better weight management), improved cardiovascular functioning, reduced stress, stronger joints, better sleep, improved posture, increased muscular endurance, elevated mood and a lowered risk of many diseases.

Running offers all of the above and potentially more, not the least of which is a more effective means of boosting bone density, at least based on studies of recent, which suggest that some form of jumping is needed to produce the desired effect. Running is also a calorie incinerator; without question, you get a lot more bang for your buck, or in this case, a lot more energy consumed for the same workout duration as you would from walking. And running can be exhilarating; giving you a sense of accomplishment as your ability to run further and/or faster continues to climb. And it's simply fun! Reminds me of the carefree jubilation of recess, when you ran as part of a spontaneous game of tag and not as a way to burn off the pizza you ate last night. Running also has a large community; if you've ever

been to a race, either as a spectator or participant, you know the infectious energy that one feels from being surrounded by like-minded folks who are as passionate about living an active lifestyle as you are! Don't get me wrong, you'll still experience this among walking enthusiasts, but the overall passion still tends to be more universally palpable among runners. Put it this way: If you've ever been (or wanted to be) an athlete, this is one great way to let your inner competitor come out and play!

So running and walking each offers an array of benefits. Knowing this, why not consider both, rather than simply picking one or the other? Of course, it's important you check with your doctor about this first, as there are instances in which a running or walking program should not be undertaken. But once you've been cleared for take off, the sky really is the limit, as long as you know where your body's abilities lie and stay mindful of your own personal goals.

Before I give the extended example below of how a run/walk program can get started and evolve, I want to emphasize that my greater goal here is not so much about bogging you down with too many details at this early stage, but rather, to offer up the idea that YOU, yes, YOU can commit to taking this concept the full nine yards. In other words, you can begin your career as a run/walk athlete today and still be improving and exploring as a run/walk athlete a year from now or even five years from now. You need never move on to more continuous running. You can, of course. But you don't have to; the run/walk workout alone can take to your goals and beyond!

But examples are always a helpful way to give you some direction, so here is one expanded sample of how such a set-up can work and grow.

Sample Run/Walk Program Progression

Say you've been walking regularly for a long time, averaging about an hour per walking workout. You enjoy your workouts, but wouldn't mind making them even more effective, especially for those times you can't put in a full 60 minutes. You've often thought about running, and maybe you even tried some "test jogs" a couple of times. But you feel concerned that you don't know how to do it right and thus will hurt yourself. Or you found it so immediately tiring you felt discouraged and stopped. But one day you read up on run/walk intervals and decide to give this "happy medium" a try.

So you start by taking one of your usual walks – say, for 45 minutes – but intersperse 5-10 light jogging intervals lasting no more than 30 seconds each. That's it! Just 5-10 times, placed anywhere within the workout (that is, after a warm-up and before the cool-down walk, of course). You build from there.

Let's say in 6-8 weeks' time, you have now graduated to the following (still 45 minute) workout:

5 minutes	Warm-up walk
35 minutes (that is, 7 interval cycles):	Per interval cycle: 1 minute light running, 4 minutes walking
5 minutes	Cool-down walk

And let's now fast-forward a bit: Let's say a few months later you have settled into the following more ambitiously paced workout (same duration, 45 minutes):

5 minutes	Warm-up walk
35 minutes (that is, 7 interval cycles):	Per interval cycle: 2 minutes light running, 3 minutes walking
5 minutes	Cool-down walk

By now, you've experienced many positive changes, not the least of which is some weight loss, and feeling leaner. Your legs are definitely firmer and even your posture has improved. Your energy is off the charts, and yet you're sleeping very soundly. More over, you're enjoying that feeling of satisfaction at the accomplishment of successfully

building quality run cycles you're your workouts! You feel very good at where you're at, and what's more, the structure of your workouts is allowing you to cover a 3-mile distance per outing, easily. Hooray!

Sure, you COULD stop there, and just keep your workouts the same for the long haul. But why?

Racing for the Run/Walk Athlete: Endless possibilities and "anyone can do this" strategies!

With all the 5K "fun" runs and walks out there, you can tap into the excitement of adding this experience to your year's activities, and to do so not as a spectator, not as a volunteer, but as an athlete. Because that's what you are! There's nothing like the joy of crossing an actual, REAL finish line, especially after weeks of hard work to get you there in the best shape possible. You even have people cheering you on! Where else in life can you get that kind of instant, exuberant positive feedback, and without having to be The Best?

Or maybe you've done some running in the past, but either stopped or are recovering from an illness or injury, and because of which continuous running is either not desirable or not even an option at the moment. Isn't it nice to know there's still a potential alternative to challenging yourself in races?

Best of all, your training for racing as a run/walk athlete need not be any less strategized than that of people who run continuously. In fact, the two approaches – running vs. run/walk intervals – have enough in common that a race training schedule can be developed using basically the same framework. In running, a typical "well-rounded" training program includes a weekly schedule of at least 1-2 "easy" runs, at least one longer-distance run, and at least one workout in which you do speed work or hill training. You can certainly do the same even when keeping to a run/walk schedule! In that case, your 5K training might look somewhat like this:

[Sample Schedule: Run/Walk Training for a 5K Race*](#)

Sunday	Rest day
Monday	Easy Run/Walk Workout: 45 minutes of run/walk intervals: a 5-minute warm-up walk, then 7 cycles of 2 minutes light running/3 minutes walking, then a 5-minute cool-down walk
Tuesday	Long Run/Walk: Follow the same pattern as above, only add enough intervals to add up to 60-70 minutes, instead of 45
Wednesday	Rest Day
Thursday	Easy Run/Walk Workout (see Monday's format)
Friday	Speed Work: Instead of 45 minutes, do 30 minutes (including the 5-minute warm-up and cool-down), with the balance of time (4 intervals) following the same 2-minute run, 3 minute walk cycle. But one change: For each 2-minute run cycle, run your "normal, comfortable pace for the first minute; for the second minute, run just a little bit harder. You can also substitute a Hill Work session instead of Speed Work, with special adjustments just for run/walk athletes. But....that's a detail for another article!
Saturday	Rest day

**Special Note: Given the topic of this article, you'll notice I make no mention of stretching in the above example. However, it's important to allocate a few minutes at the end of each workout for some good quality stretches, particularly those aimed at the hamstrings, glutes, and calf muscles.*

Why follow the above format? The idea is that your "easy" workouts help build your fitness base, your "longer" workouts help build your endurance and stamina, and "speed work"....well, that's pretty obvious! On top of that, you can hone in on a race day strategy, just the way continuous runners do. This includes how you plan to pace yourself in the race itself, how to hydrate for the race, what to wear, how to warm up, what to eat (in the weeks and days

before, for example), etc. The fun part is watching how all of these elements do come together to make a difference. There's always room for improvement and more tweaking!

Don't Worry, One Step at a Time

Now take a deep breath. Don't worry if the above seems off-putting or confusing. Remember, one step at a time and everything is very flexible. My main point is that you can take your run/walk athletics wherever you want to, be it easy, casual "fun" workouts for health and recreation, a more whittled program for enhanced fitness, or all the way into "serious" race training. It's all up to you and it's all within your reach!

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