
BUILT TO LAST

THE MOST UNDERRATED 'TALENT' FOR DISTANCE RUNNING SUCCESS IS DURABILITY

I always thought I was talented. I won my state championship in the mile. I ran 53 seconds for 400m and my VO2 max was tested at more than 76 ml/kg/min (quite high). I was also driven, loved training and was competitive. And even at a young age, I accepted that running success was about work over time — over months and years, not days and weeks. I had it all except one crucial component: durability. I was hurt all the time.

Durability is the most underrated component of distance running talent. Everyone knows a runner who is amazingly talented but seems to be always injured. We also know the runner who believes she's not talented but never gets hurt. In the end, the uninjured runner has a better chance of long-term success than the talented runner. We need to not only focus on the X's and O's of training workouts. We need to also focus on durability, because if we can stay injury-free, we really can find out how good we can be.

How do you improve your durability? Here are four steps that you can commit to right now to make yourself injury resistant:

STEP #1 TRAINING THE OVERALL ATHLETE

It's refreshing to see so many elite athletes doing ancillary training to improve their durability. You see an increasing number of videos depicting the drills, exercises, plyometrics, flexibility work and balance training routines performed by the fastest of the fast, to help them better tolerate the high level of training they perform. If you don't want to spend all your time scanning the online videos, take a weekly yoga class to improve strength, flexibility and balance.

STEP #2 INJURY RISK EVALUATION

Many athletes struggle to find someone who knows the sport, plus the cause and effect of injuries, because sometimes the cause of the injury may be far away from where you feel pain. You need to start asking around. Increasingly you'll find health professionals who understand running and won't give you the "Just take six weeks off" advice that infuriates all runners. Find as many as you can and get evaluated. You will hear some consistent answers, and you will hear some conflicting ones. Just listen and learn.

STEP #3 DEVELOP AND EXECUTE YOUR PREHAB PROGRAM

Some studies say two-thirds of us get hurt every year. Can you imagine if two-thirds of football, basketball or baseball players got hurt every season? There would be a congressional inquiry into this serious problem. But in running, we just accept it. I say no. Let's start today to change this stat so we can enjoy our running more.

Set up your own prehab program today so you don't have to do rehab after an injury. Take what you know from your injury history, the evaluations you've had, and your research, then visit the experts in your area and create a program that addresses your issues. For example, if your hamstrings are your Achilles' heel, then come up with a program for stretching, strengthening and protecting them.

With the amount of information now available, there is no reason each of us shouldn't have a simple program that addresses weaknesses. Simple is key: Don't develop a routine with 20 exercises that you must do every day. You won't do it. Find two to five exercises and commit to them. After you get comfortable with those, add a few more. Most runners have one or two main culprits for their ailments, so it really shouldn't be too hard to address them.

STEP #4 SMART TRAINING

There is a level of training at which you will not get hurt. Most of your year needs to be at this level. It's OK to have some periods (usually when preparing for your biggest race) where you push the envelope a bit, but this should be the exception and not the rule. I can run 30–40 miles per week now without a hint of an injury. I can even run 50–60 miles per week on occasion, but if I try to train at this level week after week, I'm asking for trouble. So, I keep it at 30–40 miles for most of the year.

This has been a difficult adjustment. I ran 70–100 miles per week when I was younger. I still want to train at that level, but even when younger I was hurt a lot, so why would I think I could do that now? I'm better off staying injury-free so I can enjoy running and get to races healthy. It's not about how much training you can do — the far-too-common mileage badge of honor. It's about how much training you can do while staying healthy year after year. That's right. Year after year. Let's end this abysmal injury rate in our sport and build durability so all runners can fulfill their talents.