

BE A BETTER RUNNER

Learn how to be a better runner from Bob Wallace, former champion marathoner, life-long runner, and experienced coach of both novice and seasoned runners.

Being a better runner is all relative. Where are you now? Where do you want to be? When do you want to be there?

Successful running, at any level, is like trying to assemble a jigsaw puzzle. It's a lot of different pieces that when dumped out of a box look like they could be impossible to put together. But finding the corners and the edges is a great place to start. This article is aimed at helping you get the edges and corners connected.



Regardless of your speed, ability, genetics, lifestyle and a multitude of other things, here is a checklist that will help you meet your goals.

1. *Set a long term goal and make a plan.* If you don't know what the completed puzzle looks like, it's going to be difficult to join all the pieces together. Likewise, in running, you need to know where you want to be and how you're going to get there. Having a destination in mind is critical to being able to evaluate how you progress in your travels.
To me, a long term goal is at least a year out, and for some runners maybe 3 to 5 years. For most a year is a good starting point. Maybe your goal is to run your best marathon time, or qualify for the Boston Marathon. Maybe it is finishing your first marathon. No matter, the goal needs to be specific, as well as subject to change, should the circumstances warrant. The goal needs to be realistic too. Improving from a 28:00 5K to a 23:00 time is a huge step. Can it be achieved in one year?
2. *Planned recovery* is something that most runners don't take into consideration. So much focus is placed on the miles and training, yet recovery can play the most critical part of a workout schedule and overall plan. The theory of training is that you over tax the body with work and, then allow it to recover. It is only when you allow yourself to recover that your body adjusts to the extra workload. But that increase in workload cannot go on forever. Depending on your own body, you will need to take an easy week once a month or even once every two weeks. Not only that, but every couple of months you will have to take an extended time of easy running to allow yourself both a physical and mental rejuvenation.
3. *Don't get injured.* Of course, easy to say, difficult to carry out for most runners. But here are the keys in a nutshell. Don't increase your mileage too quickly. Listen to your body's feedback and act upon it. Allow your body to recover adequately. Include dynamic warm up exercises, core strength training and cross training in your overall schedule. And stay away from large vehicles, unseen tripping hazards and other random acts of God that may cause you time away from running. Most runners are injured by their own actions. Always remember you are in control.
4. *Consistency* is an essential aspect of your running program and, over the long term will assist you to become a better runner. Your running plan has to be based on the reality of your lifestyle. If you're married with 3 kids, maybe 3 days of running is what you can count on week after week. If you travel a lot, plan your running around that schedule. If you find yourself pinched for time; change that 75 minute run into a 10 minute warm up, 20 minute tempo run and a 5 minute cool down and get on with life. It's best to avoid running 3 straight days and then having 4 days off.

5. Overall, your training should be *progressive*. That is, over time you should see an increase in your overall mileage if you're training for a marathon, an increase in the number of vertical feet if you're training for a mountainous trail race; or an increase in the intensity of your runs if you're training for a 5K. That progression isn't necessarily a straight line, you'll have ups and downs with recovery and tapering etc.
6. *Variety* is the spice of life and it is the spice of a healthy running program too. Variety comes in all forms; in workouts, the terrain you run over, the running surface, the types of intervals you run, even in the running shoes you wear. Always running mile repeats on the 3rd Tuesday of the month may not be the answer to running a better half marathon.
7. A *well balanced* training schedule is a must for long term success. You have to balance running with recovery, cross training, strength training and racing. Sure, some people can go for months without taking a day off, but the real question is can you? As I have aged I spend as much time as I did when I ran 100 miles a week. But now I spend less time running and more time on a foam roller, doing movement preparation exercises, core and overall strength exercises, even yoga. Everyone has to find their own balance and be willing to let that balance change throughout the years.
8. *Evaluate* your past training and racing and make an assessment of what you think needs to be changed. The definition of insanity is repeating the same things over and over and expecting different results. I think that some runners do the same thing. Without adjusting their training schedule, they expect to run faster or further, or both. As you age and your lifestyle change, your running should as well.
9. The *flexibility to adapt to change* is an important aspect of becoming a better runner. The fact that you set a realistic goal 3 months ago doesn't mean that things outside your sphere of control haven't changed. Athletes who set goals may be categorized as driven personalities who, once focused, won't let anything stop them. But I can assure you that over the course of a year something will happen that will require you to adjust your training or racing or life. Be prepared and willing and able to make those adjustments.
10. Schedule yourself, say once a month, to *check your progress* and see how you are doing. Are your workouts being completed ok? How do you feel? If you're feeling tired all the time or getting sick, why? Are you where you need to be overall or ahead of schedule? Find someone to be a sounding board if necessary. What you don't want to happen is pig headedly forging ahead for months and then feeling like you're not improving.

Chances are we're not going to the Olympics, but we all want to feel like the time we spend pursuing our running will help us maximize our potential. Following these guidelines is a step in the right direction.