

Incorporate Strides in your Training Program

Benefits of Strides by Bob Wallace, former champion marathoner, life-long runner, and experienced coach of both novice and seasoned runners.

I'm a huge fan of strides for runners of all abilities and experience, regardless of speed. All runners should have strides as part of their training program. It doesn't matter if you're training for your first 5K or running yet another ultra, strides will help you.

Let me first describe what I mean by the word "strides." Strides are short sharp bursts of speed (15 to 20 seconds in length) followed by at least a minute to 90 seconds of recovery. Strides are run so you build up the speed over the 15 – 20 seconds until you are moving at a not quite an all-out sprint. You are always running under control, but fast. Each stride should be a little quicker than the previous one. Due to the limited length of the stride and the long recovery, strides are not supposed to be a workout in themselves.

There are a number of ways to incorporate strides into your running. If you've ever found yourself near the start line of a 5K race, you've probably seen the elite runners do strides right before the race begins. Those runners are priming themselves to take off when the starter releases them. You can also do strides as part of a warm up routine prior to running intervals or tempo runs. Strides are also a good option for new runners to try before transitioning into more regulated speed work. The same can be said for those coming off a base period of easy aerobic running.

Sometimes I'll include strides during a recovery runs or easy runs. Indeed, it's a good practice for runners to include strides during their base work while they are building up their long runs. For the speedsters, strides are a great way to stretch out the legs during their cool down after a quality session.

What makes strides a beneficial part of a running program? Firstly, strides allow you to run at a much faster pace than normal; it also adds variety to your runs. Secondly, strides teach your body to recruit those dormant fast twitch fibers that rarely get used. Thirdly, strides allow you to work on your running mechanics and improve your neuromuscular coordination resulting in improved running form and efficiency. Fourthly, strides will improve your finishing kick in shorter events.

The best way to do strides is to find a running surface that is relatively smooth and flat. The distance is not that important; anywhere that you can run without interruption for 15 to 20 seconds is adequate. This is the time where you focus totally on your running form – run tall, lean forward slightly from the ankles, exaggerate and quicken your arm swing, concentrate on landing on your forefoot and most importantly, relax! Start by doing 4 strides and build up until you can do 8. Any more than 8 and strides become work. Remember, you never start strides until you are properly warmed up and you never do a stride until you are completely recovered from the last one.

Incorporate strides into your running routine 2 to 3 times per week. Over time, strides will make you a faster runner without a whole lot of extra effort.