How to improve your 1.5 mile run time

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11/4/2008 - BEALE AIR FORCE BASE, Calif. -- Usually a month or two before our annual Air Force physical fitness test many of us begin to feel the stress of wanting to score a faster run time. Unfortunately a month or two prior to testing is too late to begin training for a better run time.

Endurance is a key factor in our responsibility to be physically ready to meet mission requirements under the AEF concept. To achieve good, excellent or outstanding run times, you must be prepared and dedicated to an effective aerobic conditioning program to meet and then exceed fitness goals.

In this article I will explain why speed training in aerobic conditioning is so important in decreasing your run time. I will outline some important tips to help you improve your time and pace. Lastly, I will describe two speed training routines you can follow when you are ready to begin your speed training. To meet standards of fitness you must begin your preparation at least 6 months prior to testing. To exceed the standard for an excellent or outstanding rating you must be committed to a running routine that includes both endurance and speed training year round.

In his article "How to Run Faster" dated April 2007, Gabe Mirkin, M.D., outlined beneficial information on how to improve your running time. Dr. Mirkin based his guidance on his 30 years of experience training for marathons and practicing sports medicine.

He states; "If you don't run very fast in practice, you won't be able to run very fast in races."

Dr. Mirkin based his claim on a study performed by the University of Copenhagen where scientists studied experienced runners. One group ran a 30 mile a week regiment mixed with a series of 100 yard dash workouts. The other group ran a straight 60 mile a week program. Runners who ran fewer miles at a faster pace had a 7 percent improvement in their body's ability to maximize oxygen and improved their run times by as much as 20 to 30 percent. Runners who did not increase their speed in practice did not improve, even though they ran twice as many miles.

Jogging will reduce your chance of injury, but it won't help you to run fast. The ability to run fast in races depends on how fast you can run in practice. It's important to use caution here running fast every day will damage your muscles ending in injury. Most top athletes plan their workouts so they run very fast only two days a week. One should never run fast on consecutive days or when your legs feel heavy or hurt. Remember it takes at least 48 hours after a fast running routine for your muscles to heal enough to allow you to run comfortably again at a faster pace. In all physical fitness training programs proper technique and posture is essential for success and injury avoidance.

To properly train for a 1.5 mile or 5k race, you need to have a two-to-three months of distance training to build up the needed endurance, before you can start your speed training workouts. You then need to conduct speed training workouts for at least another two months to be competitive. Dr. Mirkin again provides excellent technique tips to follow when training.

- Always warm-up before you stretch; stretching cold muscles will injure them.

- The best stretch is the hamstring stretch because it is the major muscle you work when running. Other muscles to stretch are the calves, quadriceps, groin, lower back and shoulders. Running involves a total body work out. Lack of proper stretching will cause poor posture during running. Poor posture in turn reduces efficiency and poor oxygen absorption decreasing your ability to run faster and longer.

- Practice running lightly and quietly. Pounding your feet is a sign of poor technique resulting in wasted energy and undue body stress. (Remember stress is wasted energy)

- Don't bob or roll your head. Your head weighs about 10 lbs. This action creates tension in the shoulders and spine. Try focusing your gaze 20-to-30 meters ahead to help prevent this bad habit.

- Don't allow your wrists to flap around. A common mistake is hand flopping as a relaxed running style - in fact this action creates tension/stress in your shoulders causing them to tighten to pick up the slack.
- Lengthen your stride. Ideally, a long-distance runner sets a 170-190 strides per minute pace. If you take more than that, you're not running efficiently.

- Increase your upper body strength. Good core strength tightens the body to eliminate tension. This will improve your running style (posture) and builds stamina.

- Don't do heavy leg exercises every day. Repeated heavy leg workouts without proper rest periods will overwork your legs resulting in injury.

- Make a commitment to train. Perform running training at least four days a week and alternate between longer (jogging) and shorter (sprints) run periods. This will build endurance and increase pace for longer periods of running. Set realistic goals to beat your own time over gradual periods.

- Do a cool down. Never just stop running; Walk the run off till your heart rate is moderate. Then stretch because if you don't you will have foot pain making it difficult to walk or run again.

During the endurance building training runners should to concentrate on the above tips to develop excellent running form. Endurance running evolves at a moderate pace with a goal of gradual build up in your time and distance. Your goal at first should be to accomplish two miles within a 20 to 25 minutes goal. Once this goal is achieved progress to six miles in 60 minutes goal. When you have mastered the six in 60 goal your body and mind will have the sufficient endurance needed to begin speed training. Below are two speed training programs to follow to improve your pace.

Day 1 - Tempo run. Warm up for 10 minutes. Run briskly for 20 minutes (80% effort), cool down 10 minutes.
Day 2 - Rest day
Day 3 - Easy 30 minute run
Day 4 - 40/20 drills. Warm up 10 min., run 12 cycles of 40 sec. sprints, then jog 20 sec.. Cool down 10 min.
Day 5 - Rest day
Day 6 - Long run. Start slowly and run at a moderate/relaxed pace for 40-90 minutes (the longer the better).
Day 7 - Rest day.

Once the above routine is mastered try challenging yourself once every two weeks with this technique:

1) Find a local track (1/4 mile) or flat surface (1/4 mile) to run on.
2) Stretch and do a light warm up (e.g. 25 jumping jacks or a light jog).
3) Do a 1/4 mile sprint; followed by a 1/4 mile jog and repeat for two miles.
4) Keep a record over time to see if you improve.

What I addressed above is just a start to an improved fitness score on your next PT test. Simple jogging or treadmill workouts will improve your endurance, but only to certain level to a plateau and you cease to improve. I witnessed many people dropping out during our wing PT run Oct. 21. Either they lacked the endurance or the will power to meet a simple two mile run challenge.

If you were in the crowd of people who dropped out or had extreme difficulty keeping up you must take note. You will be tested again, either on your annual PT test where, if you fail you place your career in jeopardy with a referral EPR, or you could be tested in combat where if you fail due to physical fitness limitations you could be dead!