



Ask the Expert with Dr. Darrell Menard

Find Answers to your Sport Medicine Questions!

80/20 Rule - Slowing down to go faster!

Q: *I haven't run regularly for several years and this spring I decided to start training for a half marathon. After carefully progressing my workouts, I am now running 50k/wk with no injuries. I tend to "hammer" my runs and have been told I train too hard. Could you provide some advice on how best to balance my hard and easy training? Celine*

A: Dear Celine: thank you for this great question. One of the most common mistakes runners make is running too hard on their easy days. Many runners think their easy days are "Junk Mileage" and a waste of time. Nothing could be further from the truth. Making time for recovery is an extremely important part of every training program and without it training is just stress.

Exercise scientists have looked at what proportion of low, medium and high intensity training yields the best results. After carefully studying how a variety of world class endurance athletes train, Dr. Stephen Seiler, a renowned exercise physiologist, found a remarkably consistent pattern – they all do approximately 80% of their training at a low intensity. Only 20% of their training was done at a high intensity. This highly effective training strategy is commonly referred to as the 80/20 rule.

Failing to recognize the importance of the 80/20 rule, many athletes train too hard on their easy days and too easy on their hard days. These athletes consistently train in the "mediocre middle" and end up performing sub-optimally and put themselves at increased risk of injury. Using the 80/20 rule is a much smarter way to train as it will allow you to get more fitness bang for your training buck.

To incorporate the 80/20 rule into your training program you need to do 3 things:

- Determine your low and high intensity training zones. The internet has sites to help you do this. One example would be <http://mattfitzgerald.org/8020-zone-calculator/>. Using this site - a 40 minute 5k runner's low intensity zone pace would be 10:52/k. This pace decreases approximately 16 seconds/k for every minute faster than 40 minutes you can run. Their high intensity zone pace would be 8:00/k. This pace decreases approximately 12 seconds/k for every minute faster than 40 minutes you can run.
- Plan your program to have 80% low and 20% high intensity training
- Monitor and control your training intensity – it can be very difficult for someone who is highly competitive to slow down and stay in their low intensity training zone especially if they are running with other people.

The bottom line: Stop training in the mediocre middle and give the 80/20 rule a try. You may just find that slowing down will help you run faster. Training smarter is way more effective than training harder. Exercise is medicine!

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Dr. Darrell Menard is the Surgeon General's specialist advisor in sport medicine. He has worked extensively with athletes from multiple sports and has covered Canadian teams competing at multiple games including the 2012 Olympics and the 2016 Paralympic games. These articles were originally published in the Canadian Forces Journal, the Maple Leaf.

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