

Chapter 17

Training

As I grew older and running took over my life I started to listen more and more to my grandad and he became my main coach. He had always helped me talk through what I was doing and even when I joined national squads and had access to world class coaches I always liked to talk through what I was doing with him.

One evening, not too long along before the 2040 Olympics, I sat down with grandad and I asked him, 'How did you train for all your ultras?' I wanted to know what he's learnt over many years of running long distance races and how it could help me in my preparation.

'In 2006 when I first heard about the West Highland Way Race I had no idea how to train for a race of 95miles off road. At that point the furthest I'd run was a marathon and I'd done a two day mountain marathon but I didn't really know what I was getting into. I read all the stories on the web site and could see that ordinary man and women had completed the race in various times but what I didn't know was whether I could do it.

I remember I sat down with a piece of paper and mapped out my training plan. Over the years it has developed into what works for me. One of the things that I discovered is that we are all different with different ideas, different time available and different goals so it's impossible to say there is one way to train.

For me there are certain key priorities to my training. Let me illustrate what I mean. I was a Pastor of a local church in Paisley for 7 years and one time in church I wanted to illustrate the importance of setting priorities. I brought out a jar with a wide mouth at the top and a dozen fist- sized rocks. One by one I invited people to put them in the jar until there was no room for any more.

I asked whether the jar was full and everyone replied, 'Yes.' I then took out a glass full of gravel and carefully placed it in the jar and shook it, causing the pieces of the gravel to work themselves into the spaces between the big rocks.

I asked again, 'Is the jar full?' This time they weren't quite so sure. I then brought out a glass of sand and dumped that into the jar until it filled up all the spaces left between the rocks and the gravel. Once more I asked whether the jar was full. This time the church knew the answer was no.

I then produced a jug of water and poured it in until the jar was filled to the brim. When I asked them what the point of the illustration was one person answered, 'No matter how busy you are if you try hard enough you can always fit more things in!' Good try but the answer I was looking for is that if you don't put the big rocks in first you'll never get them in at all.

This illustration could be used for a number of issues in our personal and professional life but as I relate it to my training for ultra running what are the big rocks that must have priority? What elements do I think I need to run ultras to be best of my ability?

The first big stone that needs to be in place is overall miles run. Before I started running ultras I was running about 25miles a week and aiming for 1,000miles a year. It was good enough to run half marathons and 10ks but I soon realised that I needed to run at least twice that to build up the stamina and time on my feet that I'd need for running the whw and other ultra races.

When I was training for my first whw race I averaged 40miles a week which looking back was probably the reason that my quads were so sore after 72miles and why I had to walk the last 23miles. But I don't think I could have done much more without causing injury. The following year I ran nearer 50miles a week and with the accumulated miles from the first year was able to run a lot stronger and further. For the next number of years I tried to make sure I ran at least 2,000 miles a year, sometimes getting over 2,500miles. For me anymore than this and it becomes counter productive. I know friends who run over 3,000 and even 4,000miles a year but I don't think my body could cope with that. It can be a fine line between not training enough and doing too much and picking up injuries.

The second big stone that needs to go in the jar is my long weekly/monthly runs. From that first year of training I realised that I needed to build up the distance I was running in training. I knew I couldn't just run 95miles straight away. I would need to build up slowly and increase the distance each month. Over the years I have found a pattern which works for me.

The key training months for me are January through to the whw race in June. At the end of each month I run a long section of the whw route. At the end of January it will be a 28mile run, then in February a 35mile run. In March I will increase it to 43miles and then I run in the Highland Fling Race which is 53miles. Four or five weeks later I will do a two day 75mile training run which involves 41miles on the first day and then 35miles on the second day.

I do the majority of these runs on the whw route which gives me the distinct advantage of getting to know the route better and better and being able to work on my pacing and splits throughout the route. It means by the time that I run the whw race in June I have covered the whole route at least three times in the last six months.

These long runs off road are one of the key factors in my training. The other advantage is being able to run them off road which is far better for my legs. I think if I tried to run similar distances on road I would have a lot more problems.

Another key stone in my training is variety. If I am going to be running 50miles or so a week then I need to make sure there is variety. So in my weekly plan I will do various sessions. I will do one fartlek session normally on a Monday night with my club. The term 'Fartlek' comes from the Swedish meaning, 'speedplay.'

A typical session will involve about 15minutes of easy running to warm up, followed by a series of strides before the main session. The main effort involves 30mins of hard running with a recovery between each hard run.

For example one session might be 2min run followed by 1min recovery, then a 3min run (90secs recovery), 4min on (2min recovery), 5min on (2min), 5min (2min), 4min (2min), 3min (90secs), 2min (1min), 1min (1min) 1min. Another night it would be 3mins on (90secs

recovery) 10 times. Once the main part of the session is over we would have an easy 15min run back to the changing room.

There are a vast number of permutations and our coach at Kilbarchan has been through most of them. The advantage to these sessions is that for the 30mins you will be running a lot faster than you could if you ran 30mins in one effort. Most runners see their times improve if they put the effort in on these runs.

There is some debate as to the benefit of fartlek sessions for the ultra runner when speed is not really a factor. Personally I think there is great benefit from doing these sessions particularly in the first part of the year when the aim is to get fitter and stronger.

Another key session during the week is my tempo run. Again I would normally do this with the club on a Wednesday night. We would run between 9-10miles and aim to run at a pace faster than your anaerobic threshold, which is the pace where your body switches from mainly aerobic energy (with oxygen) to anaerobic energy (without oxygen when lactic acid is produced as a result). The aim is to be able to raise the pace of where that occurs and the only way to do it is to push the limit over a consistent time. If possible it is good to have this tested in a laboratory situation so you know where your limits are and what pace you need to run at.

I have done it a few times over the years and it is really helpful. The test is done on a treadmill and involves running to your maximum over about 30mins. I did it for the first time for my 50 birthday present. I went to Hampden and Dr Smith took me through the test.

Firstly I was weighed and my body fat taken. Then after a rest I was wired up so he could measure my heart rate throughout the test. I had to wear a face mask so Dr Smith could analyse how much carbon dioxide I was breathing out.

I started out running a very easy pace for 3mins. I then had to stop for a few seconds while a blood sample was taken to record the amount of lactic acid I was producing. The pace was then increased for the next 3mins and once again a small blood sample was taken. This process was repeated for another 5 or 6 times.

Dr Smith could tell by the lactic acid reading when I moved into anaerobic work. Once that point was reached I had to run to exhaustion. Every minute he raised the gradient of the run to make it harder. I pushed and pushed until I felt I was going to fall off the back of the treadmill.

After I had cooled down and had a shower Dr Smith talked me through the results. He said that my body was very efficient at burning fat which is ideal for an ultra runner. He also gave me targets to plan my training around. My easy recovery runs should be slower than 7mins 25secs per mile while my tempo runs should be between 6mins 55secs and 7mins 25secs per mile. This means that my fartlek sessions should be run quickly than 6mins 55secs.

I found it really helpful to have some clear numbers to work on. I had been running for many years by the time I had this test and it confirmed what I felt I knew. When I run quicker than 7mins 25secs I am breathing hard and know I'm into anaerobic work. I would have loved to have done this test when I was in my mid twenties and at my peak but better late than never.

I've done it a couple more times over the years and it is so helpful in planning how to train and race. I would certainly recommend it to anyone who is serious about their running.

Another key session in my week is my long slow run. As I already mentioned once a month this will be a long, long run but on the other weeks I will aim to do a long run of at least 15 miles off road. I will try and increase the distance each week building up to the longer run at the end of the month.

So each week I will aim to do one fartlek session, one tempo session and one long slow off road run. Some weeks I will also do some work on hills, normally on a Friday. I will either run on my local park where I have a mile circuit which involves two up hills and two down hills. I will run this four times giving me lots of hills to run up and down! Or I will run on the road and find a hill which I can run up and down.

There is a very steep hill about a mile from our house in Paisley. I will use the mile getting there as a warm up, then work hard for the mile to the top of the hill. I normally carry on for another mile of undulating terrain before turning round and running back. The mile downhill is the key reason I do this route as it forces my muscles to adapt to running down hill which was one of the factors that stopped me running in my first ultra.

As I try and run six times a week that leaves me with two easy runs on Tuesday and Thursday. I read somewhere that most people 'run their easy runs too fast and their tempo runs too slow' so I do try and make sure my easy recovery runs are run easily.

I work on the hard easy principle of a hard session followed by an easier run. I find the variety of the sessions I do really helps with both motivation and pushing my body to be as fit as I can.

I have long recognised the fact that I'm getting slower as I get older but I'm determined to try and keep the slowing process as gradual as possible. I like to use the age graded charts that help you compare your performances as you get older.

The idea is that for a particular run you are given a percentage of the world record for that age group. So for example when I was 25 my half marathon time of 1hr 16mins 20secs would be 78% of the world record. Then when I'm 55yrs old my half marathon time of 1hr 27mins 42secs is 79% of the world record. So my performance at 55yrs old is actually better than my performance when I was 25yrs old even though it was over 11mins slower.

Another important stone in my training plan is the importance of rest. Making sure that I have regular easy weeks especially after a long run or ultra race. I learnt this lesson the hard way after my first ever ultra race in 2007 – the Highland Fling. I had been training hard for the Fling and the whw race for a number of months. I thought I had to be running further each week than I did the week before so week on week I was increasing my weekly mileage.

I ran the Fling on the Saturday and far exceeding my expectations of a sub 11hr goal by finishing in 10hrs 36mins. I was on such a high that I went along on the following Monday to the club with the intention of running at the back and not doing the Fartlek session. I just couldn't resist it and after half way I found myself near the front pushing hard and basking in the comments of my club mates who couldn't believe I'd run 53 miles just tow days earlier.

By the Thursday I felt a pain in my shin which basically grew worse in the days that followed. I had anterior tendonitis. For the next eight weeks I struggled to run and my participation in the whw was in doubt. I did manage to run but I learnt a very important lesson that year: the importance of rest. Running over 30miles in one go does take it out of your body, especially as you get older and it is vital that you give your body time to recover and rest.

So from then on I have worked on a four week pattern of three hard weeks with my long off road run at the end of the third week then an easy week to follow. I have had far fewer injuries as a result and I'm sure it's because I've kept to that pattern. I will also make sure that the two weeks following an ultra race are very easy weeks with only gently running.

Dr Smith explained to me when I had my fitness test that the two weeks after an ultra the body is most vulnerable to injury. I have kept that in mind and it has helped me keep running to my late 70' s. The other thing that Dr Smith recommended after an ultra is to go swimming. He explained that the lactic acid in your muscles is like wax. If you leave it there by not doing any exercise then it will harden and take longer to shift. Whereas if you get the muscles working then the blood will flow through the muscles and the wax will melt and flow away.

It would be counter productive to run but swimming is ideal as it gets the blood flowing and removes the lactic acid without putting any weight on the muscles. This leads me on to the importance of cross training. I love to run and so for me it' s never easy to do another form of exercise such as swimming or cycling but it is really beneficial. Many runners would feel the benefit of swapping one of their weekly runs for a cycle, a swim or a fitness class of some sort.

The final stone that I see as crucial is running technique. For a long time we were told to just run but many books have been written and articles published explaining the importance of working on your technique. If you consider how many times you will put one foot in front of the other in a 95mile race then it makes sense to try and do it in the most efficient way possible.

So in my training I try to work on my technique so that I am running as efficiently as possible. When I see pictures or videos of myself running I do realise that I have a long way to go and that maybe I'll never have an elegant running style but I try and improve what I've got. I work on the principle that it could be a lot worse if I didn' t try!'

In my career so far I have tried to take on board all of what my grandad has learnt and my training programme is based around these big stones. I feel if I can get those in place then everything will fall into line and I'll be a stronger and better runner.