The Need For Speed

*Written by* [*Southern Running Guide*](https://plus.google.com/108106624652449514377?rel=author) *on Wed 19 Mar 2014*

Interval training isn’t just for top track stars, it can be of value to the once a year 10k runner and the occasional parkrunner. And the interest and variety intervals bring mean they can be fun too...

Somewhat unfairly, interval training is often seen as being in the domain of serious athletes and top club runners. Intensive, energy-sapping track sprints aren’t really what you signed up for when you registered for an autumn 10k. That view is however a limited perpective on what intervals can be about.

Firstly, the inclusion of a weekly speed work session can bring a new dimension to your running hobby. The sessions we’re going to highlight are flexible as well as varied and provide a sense of freedom too.

The underlying premise of interval training is, of course, to increase your speed. Here, we feature three sessions that will benefit every type of runner, be it the 5k PB chaser or first-time marathoner.

**Fartlek**

Developed by a Swedish running coach Gösta Holmér, the Fartlek was used as a key method in restoring the success of the nation’s cross-country team in the late 1930s.

Essentially, it is made up of continuous running interspersed with fast bursts of pace. After a 10-15 minute warm-up at a steady pace, pick out a specific point - lamp-posts are favourites - as a marker and run to it with a significant surge of speed. After a decent recovery, pick another landmark and repeat the process.

There’s a considerable amount of flexibility in the session and it really just depends on how hard you want to push it. In a sense, the Fartlek unlocks the inner child in us; there’s a great freedom to the session and allows you to play about with the distances depending on how you feel.

**Who Does it Benefit?**

Depending on the distance of your markers, the Fartlek raises both aerobic and anaerobic thresholds. For runners looking to improve their 5k and 10k time, make sure your landmarks aren’t beyond 800m and allow for a short, snappy burst. For speed endurance - half-marathon upwards - make your markers a bit further.

**What We Liked**

We’ve picked out a variation - *the Moneghetti Fartlek* - to give you an idea of what is required:

* Run two sets of 90 seconds hard (little bit harder than 5km pace), 90 seconds easy
* Run four sets of 60 seconds hard, 60 seconds easy
* Run four sets of 30 seconds hard, 30 seconds easy
* Run four sets of 15 seconds hard, 15 seconds easy

With a 15 minute warm-up, 20 minutes of quality work and a 10 minute warm-down, the Moneghetti Fartlek makes an economic and effective midweek session.

**800m Intervals**

If you were to consider hitting the track for any of our feature sessions, 800m intervals would be the most appropriate to ensure accuracy and a flat surface. In between the Fartlek and Magic Mile, this session boast a nice blend of speed and stamina and is a really accessible intro to interval training.

Often referred to as Yasso 800s - it was developed by Runner’s World columnist Bart Yasso - there’s a school of thought that claims an averaging of your 800m intervals will equate to your marathon time. If you can complete at least 8 repeats within a consistent bracket, let’s say 3 minutes 30, your estimated marathon time will be 3 hours 30.

While Yasso 800s can be afairly accurate point of measurement, they aren’t full proof and expect to add around 10% to get your marathon time. Even so, this session is fantastic for working on acceleration, increasing leg turnover and, given its fixed length, a great marker of progress.

**Who Does It Benefit?**

With its focus on both speed and endurance, 800m is a prime session for any runner looking to increase their pace over any distance.

**What We Liked**

Decrease recovery time between each rep to really work your aerobic threshold. We found this variation on the session especially useful when aiming for a 10k PB.

* 10 minute jog / 1 mile warm up
* 800m rep at 5k pace. So if your 5k PB is 25 minutes, aim for 4 minutes
* Start with a recovery of 4 minutes, decreasing every 20 seconds after each interval until you reach 2 minutes
* 15 minute cool down

Try this over a 3/4 week period, building up from 3 or 4 reps by adding a further one each week.

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**Magic Mile**

There’s something wholly appropriate about including a session that revolves around a mile; it is the measurement by which we total our distance for the week and the unit you immediately think of when working out your pace.

Mile repeats also allow you to exercise your sense of pace judgement - by setting and sticking to a time for each lap, you will be able to translate this to an effective race-pace strategy on the big day. If you have an event approaching, an averaging of your mile repeats can also be a very accurate way of predicting your finishing time.

If you’re after a bit of variation (and love even more of a challenge), try mile repeats on a slight gradient and go back and forth, starting and finishing at the same point. This will mean on the uphill you will need to work that bit harder.

**Who Does It Benefit?**

By varying the number of repeats, the mile workout can help prepare you for any distance between 10k and the marathon. As a general rule of thumb, if you’re preparing for a 10k, aim to complete each mile at your 5k pace. If you are targeting a half-marathon or above, your repeats shouldn’t be quicker than your 10k speed.

**What We Liked**

The Magic Mile session can be particularly useful for increasing stamina in preparation for long distance events.

10 minute warm-up that covers at least a mile

* Mile repeat that correlates to your 10k time—so if you ran your last 10k in 50 minutes, aim for an 8:03 minute mile
* Walk/jog for 400 metres between intervals, giving yourself at least a 2 minute recovery

Repeat three to four times, ensuring that your recovery time between each interval is the same and aim for an interval time that is within 10 seconds of your predicted pace