>>> GUIDANCE NOTES

Hey there - Thomas from Marathon Handbook here. Thanks for taking the time to grab a copy of this plan!
As the name suggests, this plan has been backwards-engineered around the goal of running a 5K in under 20 minutes.

For a full breakdown of the strategy we recommend, check out this article covering our approach:
How To Train For Sub-20-min-5K guide

ARE YOU READY TO TAKE ON THIS PLAN?

Before beginning this 9-week sub-20-minute 5K training plan, it's important to assess whether your current fitness and experience align with the demands of the program.

This plan is intended for runners who already have a solid aerobic base and are training consistently. Prior experience with structured workouts, such as intervals, is highly recommended. Ideally, you've completed a few 5K races and are currently running times in the low-20-minute range.

Rather than building foundational fitness, this program focuses on sharpening speed, improving running economy, and pushing your threshold to help you break the 20-minute barrier.

TRAINING METHODS

Since we are aiming for a specific time goal, we will combine two training methods: Rate of Perceived Exertion and Pace Training.

Rate of Perceived Exertion (RPE) is a method of training based on perception or how you feel. The scale ranges from 1 to 10, with 1 being extremely comfortable and 10 being an all-out sprint. Here is a complete explanation of RPE.

Pace Training, on the other hand, will be all about maintaining a specific pace, measured in minutes per kilometer or mile, for specific intervals during your run. It's like setting a rhythm for your body to follow, ensuring you stay on track towards your time goal.

BREAKDOWN OF TRAINING WORKOUTS

Cool Down

Cool down after any workout that involves changes in pace or effort levels, such as race pace and repetition pace intervals. A cool-down should be very easy, run at a 1-2 on the RPE scale, and help bring your body back to baseline regarding breathing and heart rate.

Long Runs

Long runs gradually increase your volume, which is vital in preparing you for race day. Long runs should be run at an RPE of 3-4.

Race Pace Run

Race-pace runs are just that: runs where you practice your estimated race pace for either specific intervals or the duration of the workout. Warm up for 3 km or 2 miles and cool down for 3 km or 2 miles before and after each workout.

For a sub-20-5K, your race pace is 6:16 / mile or 3:54 / km.

Repetition Pace Intervals

Repetition pace workouts are designed to improve speed, form, and running economy by training at paces faster than your 5K goal— **3:35/km (5:46/mile).** Each interval is run fast but controlled, with jogging recoveries. Warm up for 3 km or 2 miles and cool down for 3 km or 2 miles before and after each workout.

Recovery Runs

Recovery runs are nice and easy, run at conversation pace, coming in at a rate of perceived exertion of 2-3. The objective of these runs are to recovery from a harder session, and add easy volume to your week.

Rest Day

Rest days are not just a suggestion, they are a necessity. They are the days when you can rest, hydrate, refuel, and relax, without any strenuous activity or exercise. Your body needs this time to adapt and recuperate from your workouts, and to prevent injuries. So, please, respect and prioritize these rest days for better running performance.

Shake Out Run

A shake-out run is a very easy jog, usually run the day before a race to "shake out" your legs. It should be a 1-2 on the RPE scale.

Strength Training

Strength training is not just a beneficial addition to your running training plan, it's a necessity. It plays a crucial role in correcting muscle imbalances, making you a fitter, stronger, and faster runner, and most importantly, it helps you stay injury-free. Aim for two sessions of strength training per week, ideally on Tuesdays and Thursdays in the PM, but whenever you can fit it in best. Incorporate compound exercises such as squats, lunges, glute bridges, calf raises, planks, push-ups, rows or pull-ups, etc.

Strides

Strides are short accelerations in which you begin easy and increase your effort level to almost top speed, RPE 8-9, and then gradually return to your initial pace. The number of strides and their duration will be indicated in each workout. You may run them at any time throughout the run. The rest of the run should be run at an easy, conversation pace.

Kicks

Kicks are accelerations during the final meters of a rep. It's used to simulate a race-finishing surge and trains your body to change gears when fatigued. This sharpens neuromuscular coordination, improves finishing speed, and builds mental toughness by teaching you to push through tired legs with strong form.

Warm Up

Warm up before any workout that involves changes in pace or effort levels, such as intervals, such as race pace and repetition pace intervals. You never want to jump into speedwork without properly preparing your muscles and body by gradually warming up. A warm-up should be very easy; run at a 1-3 on the RPE scale.

CUSTOMIZING THE PLAN

No two runners are the same, and there's no such thing as a one-size-fits-all plan. That's why I make all my plans easy to customize: use the Google Sheets or Excel version of this plan to move things around to suit your weekly schedule, shorten or extend the plan, and mix up the workouts to suit your ability level.

In order to edit the file, please download it or make a copy (File>Make a Copy)

MEDICAL DISCLAIMER

This plan is for informational purposes only: it is not a certified exercise / health / wellness regime. Partake in run training at your own risk, always consult a doctor before starting a new exercise regime, and don't do anything stupid. Now let's get on with the details...

Questions?

Check out our Marathon Handbook Facebook Group, it's an awesome community of runners sharing their knowledge, frustrations, and wins!

Unfortunately I can't respond to individual queries these days, but the FB group is probably an even better source of running wisdom!

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