

Underpinnings

The Philosophical Principles Behind Minimalist Training For Endurance

“Everyone is an athlete. The only difference is that some of us are in training, and some are not.”

George Sheehan

There are a three important principles at work that, taken together, make it possible to do big things with a minimal time investment.

For starters, there is something known as the Pareta principle, or the the 80-20 rule. This ‘rule’, which seems to have a rough equivalent in everything from business to agriculture to social media (80% of your Facebook interactions come from 20% of your friends), is foundational to my training ideology.

In terms of fitness the rule suggests that 80% of your fitness potential comes from 20% of your training time. A second iteration of the rule means that 80% of that 80% comes from 20% of that 20%—creating a 64-4 rule. Now keep in mind that this really only applies in theory, and to someone following ‘an ideal’ training program with a proper mix of intensities. But thus applied—it is basically sound: the vast majority of your fitness from any optimal program comes from a small minority of the training time. I bet you already know what that training time is focused on too—high intensity work.

There is plenty of science behind the benefits of high intensity training, heaps

of it in fact (just do a Google search for “HIIT research” if you’re in doubt). This type of training produces the greatest need for adaptation (i.e. growth) possible in the shortest amount of time, which is why it is so efficient. But that growth doesn’t happen during training itself—it happens during recovery. Pairing high intensity work with a low-volume training schedule is maximally effective because it applies a potent (and painful) stimulus for growth, in a minimum amount of time, and then gives the body a chance to recover so it is able to do high intensity work again.

The second principle has to do with progressive and cumulative gains. Although a super low-volume, high intensity training program doesn’t allow for regular twenty mile runs or sixty mile bike rides leading up to endurance events, the events themselves can provide an opportunity for developing the mental and physical adaptations necessary for success. For example, one hour a week is plenty of time to train for a successful half marathon, and running a half provides mental and physical precedent for a marathon. A steady diet of low volume, high intensity effort combined with frequent (I aim for four to six a year) longer races keeps me in shape to tackle any challenge that comes along. Consistency is key here—a physical “base” is built over a longer period of time than in traditional programs, but with significantly less actual time invested.

Racing is training. A steady diet of longer races is all one needs to supplement a low volume training program. Here I am on my way to a third place finish during a winter 50K. I was training 2 hours a week at the time.



The final principle has to do with the huge mental effort required for LONG events. The longer the event the more the overall demands associated with it are ultimately placed on the mind, not the body. A ten day adventure race, for example, never demands the pace or immediate output that would be needed if you were trying to PR a marathon. Instead it calls for sheer determination to simply continue moving forward at almost any pace—for hours or even days—during moments when your body and mind feel completely broken. In longer races there is no way around it—your body does break down. You can't train to keep this from happening—you are physiologically incapable of running 50 or 100 miles without issue, no matter how long your training runs are. Suffering is guaranteed. The challenge then becomes accepting this suffering (a decidedly mental task), and continuing in spite of it.

Photo by Luis Moreira, adventurephoto.ca



Even when you know it is inevitable, suffering is never easy. Walking the walk in full misery mode during the fourth day of the 2010 Abu Dhabi Adventure Challenge.

Looking at things pragmatically, these principles combine to support the thesis that a super low-volume, high intensity program can provide adequate preparation for ultra-endurance events. It is no longer a question whether

high intensity work can produce results comparable to longer efforts at moderate intensities—research shows that it does. It follows then that a steady application of such work will make you fit. Furthermore, because genuine high intensity work is relative to your fitness level, continued improvement is possible with consistent application. There is no doubt that such a routine can provide the physical platform from which an aspiring endurance athlete can find success at moderate distance races such as half marathons, marathons, Olympic distance triathlons, and other multi-hour events. Participation in such events will serve both to expose the athlete to the mental challenges of ‘going long’ and help develop the confidence required to do really hard things on limited training.

So that leaves us with the how, right? How does it look on paper? What does high intensity work feel like and how do you know you’re doing it? How do you develop the mental tenacity to do it week in and week out? How do you develop the mental confidence to defy conventional wisdom and successfully complete events that are longer than weeks or months of training? How do you ‘train for anything’ on a limited volume program?