

## The McMillan Performance Page: Speed Trap

*Just because you can, doesn't mean you should*

As featured in the October 2007 issue of Running Times Magazine

I met Craig Mottram six years ago. At that time, he was a very good runner. Six years later, he's a very, very, VERY good runner (12:55 for 5,000m, bronze medalist at the World Championships). In watching his development over the years and getting to know his coach, Nic Bideau, it's clear to me that the reason for his rise to the top level in our sport is that he doesn't overtrain, especially in his speed workouts. Mottram avoids the training errors that most of us make season after season, year after year, thwarting our efforts to break through to new performance levels.

Overtraining is a big problem in our sport where the drive to succeed can be a double-edged sword. You need to be driven but if you push yourself too hard, you'll interrupt your training with an injury or fatigue. Bideau has made sure Mottram doesn't do this, and the result is a talented athlete who has gradually yet steadily built himself into one of the best runners in the world.

Mottram's example reinforces the concept I call, "Just because you can, doesn't mean you should." Just because you CAN do more running or more intense running doesn't mean that you should. Finding the optimal amount of training load is the true secret to success. For some of the greats like Mottram, a coach is at each workout to help avoid overtraining. For most of us, the responsibility falls on our shoulders. But there are guidelines we can follow to help us.

### Optimal Speed Training Guidelines

For repeats performed at 3,000m to 5,000m race pace, most runners can handle 3 miles or 5,000 meters of total work. If we think in terms of minutes of training — around 12 to 15 minutes of total work at that intensity is best. An example would be 6 x 800m or 12 x 400m or 3 x 5 minutes. At this intensity and for this volume, most competitive runners are optimally stimulated. Could you do more? Of course, but that's the point. We want to optimally stimulate that energy system, not overwhelm it. Could you run them faster? Of course, but the goal is to prepare for racing, not race our workouts.

For even faster repeats (repeats performed at mile to 3,000m race pace), experts suggest that you limit your volume to a mile or at most a mile and a half of volume (or around 3 to 7 minutes of total work). An example would be 5 x 300m or 6 x 200m. Again, you could do more but why? If our experience shows that these volumes work for even the best runners, then why trash yourself in training? The risk of injury or overtraining far outweighs any potential advantage you believe may come from doing more repeats.

What about 6 x 1 mile or 20 x 400m, you ask? Great question. For these higher volume workouts (often used to prepare for 10K or longer races), the pace is usually slower than 5K race pace and if you run slower, then you obviously can handle more volume before that system is overwhelmed (usually 4 to 6 miles). Can athletes run these longer workouts at 5K pace or faster? Maybe so, but again, it begs the question why? Mottram shows that racing your workouts is not the idea. I have seen far too many "workout kings" in my coaching career. We train to race, not train to train, so let's focus on proper execution of workouts instead of trying to compete against them.

### Really Fit? Beware Beware

There is no more important time to focus on optimal training than when you are very fit and your goal race is near. During this time, you can really drive yourself into the ground. We see it all the time: Runners have the greatest workouts of their lives but leave their races on the track. Or worse, they are so fit that they can push their musculoskeletal system too hard and end up injured. As you get really fit, beware of doing too much. Stop well before you overextend yourself. Keep your training under control and you'll arrive on race day in perfect shape, ready for a breakthrough performance.

### Knowing When to Say When

If you go to the track with Bideau and Mottram, and ask how many repeats Mottram is doing, Bideau will likely say, "I don't know. We'll see how the workout goes." As soon as Bideau determines that Mottram has had his optimal stimulus for that particular workout, he'll stop him. Could Mottram do more? Of course! And if you are training optimally, you can too. You can always do one more repeat or you can run slightly faster for each repeat, but the point is that you need to become acutely aware of when to say when.

Experiment a little but always err on the conservative side. You'll not only enjoy your training more but you'll also smooth out the ups and downs you experience in training and racing. I find that athletes who are optimally training rarely have really bad workouts or races. They are consistent because the body and the mind are always ready for the next hard session.

It's taken Mottram six years to rise to the top and his lesson of patience, consistency and most importantly, control in training is a great lesson for all of us. The next time you head to the track, remember, "Just because you can, doesn't mean you should."

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