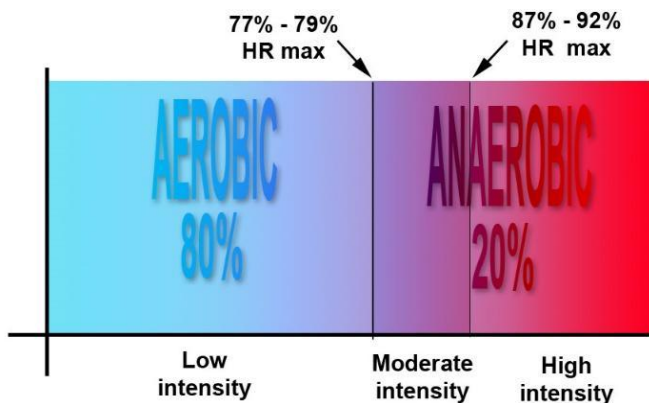


Slow Down!

Research has shown that the key to becoming a faster runner is to spend the majority of your training time going slow. In fact, elite runners have been found to spend 80% of their training at low-intensity (aerobic) and only 20% at moderate to high-intensity (anaerobic). This has led to the widely recognized 80/20 rule, which is effective for runners of all experience levels.



Low-intensity training is defined as running below your aerobic threshold (77-79% HRM), where your pace feels easy, breathing is controlled, and you can talk comfortably.

Recreational runners

Interestingly, scientists also studied the running habits of competitive recreational runners and found that on average they spend only 50% of their time at a truly low-intensity.

One possible explanation for this behaviour is a lack of awareness about appropriate intensity levels, as well as a desire to feel like every workout is challenging and productive. Whatever the reason, they're spending too much time running too hard.

Sweat the big stuff

The physiological cornerstone of running performance is aerobic capacity, and the benefits of training the aerobic system most of the time becomes obvious when you consider the statistics shown on the green coloured graphic. **Just look how much of the aerobic system is relied upon during those race distances!**

Energy Contribution		
Event	% aerobic	% anaerobic
Marathon	97.5	2.5
10k	90	10
5k	84	16
1 mile	80	20

Gastin, Paul B. "Energy System Interaction and Relative Contribution During Maximal Exercise." Sports Medicine 31.10 (2001): 725-41

Even for a 10k, you can see why spending half your time training something that only contributes 10% of your energy just doesn't make sense.

Easy is hard

Running slowly enough can require some self-discipline. It's easy to feel like you're not working hard enough to see any benefits, and there can be a temptation to default to a habitual moderate-intensity pace. This is especially true for beginner runners or those with lower fitness levels who may exceed their aerobic threshold soon after transitioning from walking to running. In group runs, it's unlikely that every runner will be able to maintain a low-intensity pace, with only a few able to do so while others run at a moderate to high-intensity level to keep up.

Case study

I've had personal experience of how challenging it can be to spend so much time running slowly.

During my 16-week marathon training in 2013 and 2014 I used a heart rate monitor, rather than perceived effort, as a measure of intensity. This ensured I stayed under my aerobic threshold throughout my long runs. It forced my pace down by almost a minute per mile! My ego took a hit for sure, but I trusted the method and persevered. Ultimately, the slow runs were less draining, and the few faster runs were performed (and felt) better -perhaps it's no coincidence that I was rewarded with PBs in both marathons.

If your fitness improvements have stagnated, or you just want to enjoy more effective, interesting and varied training then try the 80/20 method.

[Iain Denby](#)