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Set Realistic Goals in the New Year

Using test runs can help you come up with reasonable goals.

By Cindy Kuzma

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What are your plans for your upcoming running year? Whether you're looking to run a new race distance, achieve a personal best, or just stay injury-free, accurately gauging your current fitness level will help you set challenging but reasonable goals. "Your baseline gives you a jumping-off point to begin a strong, successful training season that will culminate with you achieving your goal," says Brandon T. Vallair, a coach at Run for Speed in Dallas. The following techniques will reveal where you are now so you know what to aim for three to six months down the road.

Time Trial

This test is useful for runners of every level. Newbies and novice racers will get a feel for their capabilities, while more advanced folks can use it to establish the beginning of a new training cycle, says Mindy Solkin, owner and head coach of The Running Center in New York City.

Run It: The length and effort level of your time trial depends on your experience and your target distance. Beginners and 5-K runners should run a mile—preferably on a track—making each lap progressively faster so you end with little left in the tank. Add 30 to 40 seconds to your mile time—that's your goal pace per mile for your upcoming race. So, for example, if you ran a mile in nine minutes, you should aim to complete a 5-K in 29:30 (a 9:30 pace) after about three months of training, says Vallair. Experienced runners gunning for longer distances should do a time trial that's one-third the distance of their goal race (so two miles for a 10-K or five miles for a half-marathon) at

about a 60 percent effort (you can talk in phrases), says Vallair. Your average pace per mile is your goal speed for a half-marathon; add 15 to 30 seconds per mile to that average if you're running a marathon. Repeat the time trial every three months to track your progress and reset your goal.

4 x 800's

For newcomers and intermediate runners, half-mile repeats help you gauge your speed without worrying about pacing yourself over a longer distance, says Kevin Semanick, a former running coach in Atlanta. They're particularly useful for setting a goal for your first 5-K (or your first in a while).

Run It: After a three- to five-minute warmup, run 800 meters (twice around a track) at the pace you ran your last 5-K (or at a comfortably hard pace). Adjust your pace up or down on the following repeats depending on how you feel, and recover between each with a five-minute walk or jog. After the workout, take the average pace of your repeats to determine your goal 5-K pace. Repeat this workout once a week. Over three months, gradually increase the number of repeats (to five or six) or decrease the recovery period. Once you've nailed your goal pace in a 5-K, give yourself three to six additional months to shed seconds per mile from your race pace--or run a 10-K at your 5-K speed.

Practice 5-K

Regular racers and runners who have been running three to four times a week for about four months can judge their baseline on a racecourse. Choose one that's relatively flat and has a small field so you get an accurate reading of your fitness, not your ability to dodge hundreds of participants, says Vallair.

Run It: Aim to hit your most recent 5-K speed; those who haven't run a 5-K recently (or at all) can target a comfortable pace. You can use your finish time in several ways: If you're gunning for a 5-K three months or so down the road, aim to run your goal race up to three minutes faster (the less experienced you are, the greater gains you can expect); if your target is a 10-K, run it at your practice 5-K pace. You can also use practice 5-Ks to stay on track for longer distances. "It's perfect for half-marathon and marathon training," says Semanick. "Begin your training in January by doing a 5-K. Every three months, run another one to see where you're at and how you've improved. You'll get confidence going into your race."



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