A. The 5k Crash Course (40, 50, and 65 km/wk)

The 5k Crash Course is an optional four-week introductory phase of training that uses a mixture of low-key, effort-based workouts to bring about swift, durable boost in your fitness. If you're not sure what kind of shape you're in, if it's been a while since you've done a formal training program, or if you've never done *anything* other than "just running," you should do the 5k Crash Course before you start up with marathon training. If you *do* have some idea of what kind of shape you're in, this **section is not mandatory—**feel free to jump right into marathon training.

Don't mistake the 5k Crash Course for a 5k-specific training program. Setting aside the fact that four weeks isn't nearly enough time to get ready for a great 5k, the 5k Crash Course isn't really *trying* to get you into peak 5k shape. Instead, it's a grown-up version of the lesson that legions of high schoolers and club runners learn every cross-country season: it's surprisingly easy to whip yourself into shape with a mixture of intervals and easy to moderate runs.

The 5k Crash Course uses simple, effort-based workouts that hit the right physiological stimuli while being fairly robust against poor pacing and miscalibrated effort levels—exactly the workout characteristics you want when you're bootstrapping your way to an initial fitness estimate. Necessarily, the 5k Crash Course uses a lot of free-flowing, effort-based sessions: the whole point of the 5k Crash Course is that it's doable even if you have *no idea* where your fitness is at. In comparison, the full-fledged marathon training plans are much more structured and precise when it comes to workout paces.

There are three levels to the 5k Crash Course: **Level I** (40 km/wk), **Level II** (50 km/wk), and **Level III** (65 km/wk)—choose whichever plan is closest to your current mileage level. As the name suggests, these training plans culminate in a 5k race or time trial, which will let you roll into marathon training with an accurate estimate of your current fitness.

Pace and effort guidelines for the 5k Crash Course

Effort	Feels like
Very easy	Relaxing recovery run
Easy	Normal training run
Moderate	An uptempo run with smooth, rhythmic breathing
Strong	Marathon to half marathon pace
Fast	About 5k pace
Very fast	About 3k / two-mile pace, ~5% faster than 5k pace

5k Crash Course Level II: 50 km/wk

Week	Day	Workout	Difficulty
1	M	6 × 3 min cut-down from moderate to fast with 1 min walk ◆	6/10
	T	6–8 km easy ◇	
	W	3 km easy + 6 km moderate + 4 strides	6/10
	T	6–9 km very easy	
	F	7 × 2 min fast with 1.5 min jog	7/10
	S	13–15 km easy	
	S	Off **Weekly mileage total:** 50 km	
2	M	7 × 3 min cut-down from moderate to fast with 1 min jog	7/10
	T	6–8 km easy	
	W	8 × 2 min fast with 1.5 min jog	7.5/10
	T	5–7 km very easy	
	F	6–10 km easy + 4 strides	
	S	2 km easy + 2 km moderate + 5 km strong	7.5/10
	S	Off **Total:** 53 km	
3	M	9 × 2 min fast with 1.5 min jog	8/10
	T	6–8 km easy	
	W	8 × 3 min cut-down from moderate to fast with 1 min jog	7.5/10
	T	5–8 km very easy	
	F	2 km easy + 8 km moderate + 4 strides	6/10
	S	14–16 km easy	
	S	Off **Total:** 56 km	
4	M	2 km easy + 7 km strong	8/10
	T	8–10 km easy	
	W	9 × 1 min very fast with 1 min jog	7/10
	T	6–8 km easy	
	F	5–7 km easy + 4 strides	
	S	**5k race**	10/10
	S	Off **Total:** 50 km	

◆ For workouts, warm up with 2–3 km progressing from an easy pace to a moderate pace, followed by 4 × 25 sec strides at a fast but relaxed pace. Cool down with 2–3 km easy.

◇ Adjust the easy run lengths as needed to hit the weekly mileage total as best you can. Since many workouts are time-based, how much distance you cover will vary based on your pace.

Instructions: Week 1

Monday's cut-down repeats should be evenly paced *within* each rep, but the pace should get faster from one rep to the next. Don't be afraid to start out on the slow end and work into the pace.

On Wednesday, make sure you finish the moderate run feeling like you could comfortably do a few more kilometers at the same pace without much of a problem.

For Friday's 2 min repeats, aim for an intensity that's slightly faster than what you could realistically run for a 5k right now. Make sure you finish feeling like you could do another couple reps at the end of the workout, tough.

Instructions: Week 2

Monday's cut-down session should be a little more challenging than last time, even if you end up at the same pace by the end—the extra repeat means you'll be spending more time at strong to fast paces in the back half of the workout.

Similarly, the fact that Wednesday now has an extra repeat means that this workout's difficulty will be higher. Still, make sure you finish feeling like you could do another one or two repeats at the same pace if you really wanted to.

The difficulty in Saturday's strong run should come more from the volume than the intensity. Even at the end, you shouldn't feel any real fatigue in your legs.

Instructions: Week 3

Monday's 2 min repeats will, again, be slightly more difficult than last week on account of the extra rep at the end. Still, this should not be a killer session—keep the intensity controlled, even if it gets tough at the end.

Wednesday's session should feel pretty familiar given that you've done two cut-down workouts already. Use a more gradual pace progression, aiming to hone your ability to sense small differences in intensity through the middle of this workout.

Friday's moderate run should feel like it's about 10% backed off, intensity-wise, from the pace you were able to hit for the strong run last week.

Keep the pace strictly easy on Saturday's long run—having just done a moderate run the day before, there's no need to push the pace.

Instructions: Week 4

Ideally, Monday's strong run should be evenly paced. Aim to finish feeling like you could do another kilometer or two without too much difficulty.

The 1 min repeats Wednesday should feel fast but comfortable—don't hammer the pace just because it's a low-volume workout.

Thanks to the cut-down workouts and 2 min repeats, you'll have pretty good pacing intuitions, so focus on effort, not the watch, when you're running the 5k.

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– *John*

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About the Author

John J. Davis, Ph.D. is a coach, writer, and scientist. He has been coaching marathoners ranging in experience from complete novices to elite field competitors for over twelve years. From 2013 to 2017, he was an assistant coach at Edina High School, which made four consecutive appearances at Nike Cross Nationals during his tenure. John earned his Ph.D. in human performance from Indiana University in 2023 and has spoken at international conferences and athletics competitions on the science of running injuries and running performance. His work has been featured in publications including *Runner's World*, *Running Times*, and *Men's Health*. His website, RunningWritings.com, has been publishing articles on the art and science of training since 2011. His first book, *Modern Training and Physiology for Middle and Long-Distance Runners*, was published in 2013. John has a personal best of 2:29 in the marathon and was an all-conference steeplechaser for Carleton College, where he studied chemistry. He lives in Minneapolis, Minnesota.

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