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 III: 65 km/wk

Week	Day	Workout	Difficulty
1	M	7 × 3 min cut-down from moderate to fast with 1 min walk ◆	7/10
	T	8 km easy	
	W	2 km easy + 6 km moderate + 4 strides	6/10
	T	8–10 km very easy ◇	
	F	8 × 2 min fast with 1.5 min jog	7.5/10
	S	15–16 km easy	
	S	Off *or* 5–6 km very easy **Weekly mileage total:** 65 km	
2	M	8 × 3 min cut-down from moderate to fast with 1 min jog	7.5/10
	T	8 km easy	
	W	9 × 2 min fast with 1.5 min jog	8/10
	T	6–10 km very easy	
	F	10–12 km easy + 4 strides	
	S	6 km strong	7/10
	S	8–10 km very easy **Total:** 65 km	
3	M	7 × 2.5 min fast with 1.5 min jog	8.5/10
	T	8 km easy	
	W	6 × 4 min cut-down from moderate to fast with 1 min jog	8/10
	T	5–7 km very easy	
	F	2 km easy + 8 km moderate + 4 strides	6/10
	S	16–18 km easy	
	S	Off *or* 5–7 km very easy **Total:** 65 km	
4	M	8 km strong	8/10
	T	10–12 km easy	
	W	10 × 1 min very fast with 1 min jog	7/10
	T	10–12 km easy	
	F	5–8 km very easy + 4 strides	
	S	**5k race**	10/10
	S	Off *or* 5–8 km very easy **Total:** 65 km	

◆ For workouts, warm up with 2–3 km progressing from an easy pace to a moderate pace, followed by 4 × 25 sec strides. 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 can start pretty easy—not much more than a moderate run pace. Pacing *within* each rep should be even, but bring the pace down steadily from one rep to the next. Even at the end of the workout, you should feel like you could do another repeat a bit faster if you wanted to.

Don't overthink the pace for Wednesday's moderate run: just a healthy pace that feels like you're "training, not straining."

The 2 min repeats on Friday should be slightly on the optimistic side of 5k effort, but shouldn't be too difficult overall.

Instructions: Week 2

Monday adds another cut-down repeat, which you shouldn't think of being added "at the end" of last week's workout. Instead, aim to progress the pace a bit more gradually from rep to rep this time around.

Wednesday also adds another repeat, which will bump up the workout difficulty a small amount. Still, you still want to finish this workout feeling like you could do another rep or two at the same pace if necessary.

In lieu of a long run, Saturday has six kilometers at a strong effort. The pace should feel fast but relaxed, without any real fatigue accumulating in your legs, even at the end.

Instructions: Week 3

Monday's workout progresses in a new way: increased extension with the same total workout volume. Try to average the same pace from last week's 9 × 2 min workout in this week's 7 × 2.5 min workout.

Wednesday uses the same strategy: longer reps in a structurally similar workout. Pay attention to your sense of fatigue across this workout and adjust how you progress the pace accordingly. Ideally, you'd work down to the same pace by the end as you did in last week's 8 × 3 min workout, but this shouldn't come at the cost of extreme fatigue.

Keep the pace on the long run strictly easy; this is primarily a "time-on-feet" session.

Instructions: Week 4

Monday's strong run may be a bit fatiguing at the end simply because of the volume, but the intensity should still feel fairly controlled: aim for a pace that feels like you could keep going for another kilometer or two at the end if you wanted to.

The 1 min repeats on Wednesday should feel very controlled. Finish the workout with plenty of energy in reserve for the 5k.

In the 5k, try not to start out *way* too fast, but that aside, don't worry too much about pacing. Trust your sense of effort and avoid obsessively checking your watch—this is just a fitness checkup, not a make-or-break race.

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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.

runningwritings.com john@runningwritings.com