A. The 5k Crash Course (25, 32, and 40 mi/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** (25 mi/wk), **Level II** (32 mi/wk), and **Level III** (40 mi/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 I: 25 mi/wk

Week	Day	Workout	Difficulty
1	M	5 × 3 min cut-down from moderate to fast with 1 min walk ◆	6/10
	T	4–5 mi easy ◇	
	W	4 mi moderate + 4 strides	5/10
	T	Off	
	F	6 × 2 min fast with 1.5 min jog	7/10
	S	7–8 mi easy	
	S	Off **Weekly mileage total:** 25 mi	
2	M	6 × 3 min cut-down from moderate to fast with 1 min walk	7/10
	T	4–5 mi easy	
	W	7 × 2 min fast, 1.5 min jog	7.5/10
	T	3–4 mi very easy	
	F	4–5 mi easy + 4 strides	
	S	1 mi easy + 2 mi moderate + 2 mi strong	7/10
	S	Off **Total:** 26 mi	
3	M	8 × 2 min fast with 1.5 min jog	8/10
	T	4–5 mi very easy	
	W	7 × 3 min cut-down from moderate to fast with 1 min walk	7.5/10
	T	Off	
	F	5 mi moderate + 4 strides	6/10
	S	8–9 mi easy	
	S	Off **Total:** 27 mi	
4	M	2 mi easy + 3 mi strong	7/10
	T	4–5 mi easy	
	W	8 × 1 min very fast with 1 min jog	7/10
	T	4–5 mi easy	
	F	3–4 mi very easy + 4 strides	
	S	**5k race**	10/10
	S	Off **Total:** 28 mi	

◆ For workouts, warm up with 1 mi progressing from an easy pace to a moderate pace, followed by 4 × 25 sec strides. Cool down with 1 mi 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

The cut-down repeats on Monday should be evenly paced *within* each repeat, but should get faster from rep to rep. This session, and its subsequent evolutions later on, will help you calibrate your sense of pacing: you want to work through the paces so that each repeat gets faster, but not *so* much faster that the final rep is overwhelmingly difficulty.

Don't overthink the pace for Wednesday's moderate run. Just aim for intensity that's noticeably faster than your normal easy run pace and doesn't leave you out of breath. Even at the end of this run, you should feel ready for a few more miles.

Friday's repeats should feel just a bit faster than what you could sustain for a 5k right now. Aim to finish feeling like you could comfortably do a few more repeats if desired.

Instructions: Week 2

Monday adds another rep to the cut-down intervals, so to get the overall difficulty right, you'll need to progress the pace a little bit more gradually from rep to rep versus last week. Still aim to be going just as fast (or a bit faster) at the end, though.

On Wednesday, you'll actually *do* one of those extra repeats you imagined doing on Friday, finishing off the workout faster than you did last week. That will bump the difficulty up a bit, but it should still feel pretty controlled.

Saturday uses a step-wise progression structure. Finish strong, but make sure you feel like you could do another mile about 10–20 seconds faster if you really wanted to.

Instructions: Week 3

Monday progresses the 2 min repeats once again. By this point, the final one or two reps will be getting tough, but you should still feel like you could keep going at the end if necessary—even if you're glad you don't have to.

Wednesday should have an even more fine-grained progression in pace from rep to rep than last week. By now, you should have a better feel for how to pace yourself so you hit a fast pace at the end of the workout without accumulating too much fatigue in the middle.

Keep the pace strictly easy on Saturday's long run, especially since you'll be coming off the moderate run the day before.

Instructions: Week 4

Monday's strong run should still finish feeling like you could do a mile or two further without too much difficulty—this should be a controlled effort, not a hard tempo.

Wednesday's session is a bit lighter, and you'll likely find yourself able to hold a faster pace than on last week's 2 min repeats. Just don't hammer this one too hard!

For the 5k race, just run your best and see what happens—don't overthink the pacing or your performance. You'll update your fitness estimate in a few weeks anyways.

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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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