

Want to Progress? Don't Fall Into the Trap of 'Lifestyle Training'

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Fitzgerald explains.

Debbie loves working out. She has lots of time to train, having retired early from a career in marketing, and she trains a lot: two workouts a day in a mix of disciplines (running, swimming, cycling, strength training, yoga), seven days a week, year-round. I wouldn't say she overtrains, however. Aside from the occasional minor or injury or stale patch, Debbie absorbs her training well, feels pretty good, and maintains a high level of fitness.

The problem that brought Debbie to me for advice was not overtraining but a lack of improvement, particularly at the marathon distance. Over the span of twenty years, she'd run five marathons, recording times between 3:24:00 and 3:29:00 in all of them. After debuting in 3:26:11, Debbie had expected to make steady progress in her subsequent marathons, perhaps even scaring the 3-hour barrier eventually, but it hadn't happened. She was stuck at the same level of performance she'd started at, and she didn't understand why.

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Having seen other cases like hers, I did understand why Debbie was stuck. Hers was a classic case of what I call *lifestyle training*. When an athlete trains pretty much the same all the time, that's lifestyle training. Athletes like Debbie who train a lot consistently expect to get fitter and faster, but the fact of the matter is that no matter how much you train, your fitness and performance won't change unless your training changes. It's akin to eating the same meals every day and expecting to lose or gain weight. Not gonna happen.

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The graph below (created by Dream Run Camp assistant coach Jack Shea) offers a visual representation of what I'm talking about. The red line represents the training load and fitness of a lifestyle trainer like Debbie. The blue line represents the training load and fitness of an athlete who periodizes their training. As you can see, the lifestyle trainer is fitter than the periodizer for most of the training cycle, but in the final weeks, this athlete surpasses the lifestyle trainer and brings greater fitness into the race that falls at the very end of the cycle—which is the only day on which an athlete's fitness really matters.

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definition the same, but the periodizing athlete is fresher because they've done less up to this point. Therefore it's likely that this athlete will be able to tolerate and benefit from further increases in training, while the lifestyle trainer is likely to burn out. Now you understand why doing less training now allows you to do more training (and get fitter) later.

Not every lifestyle trainer is as stuck as Debbie was. Some athletes periodize their training to a limited degree, perhaps increasing the distance of their weekend long run as their next marathon gets closer, while all of their weekday runs stay pretty much the same. A certain amount of progress is achievable with this approach, but to maximize your improvement, you need to make your training look more like that blue line. Do less than you could most of the time, move in a clear direction, and redefine your limits when it counts, on race day!

Written by
Matt Fitzgerald

Matt Fitzgerald is the creator and head coach of [Dream Run Camp](#), a year-round luxury training retreat for runners of all abilities based in Flagstaff, Arizona. His many books include [On Pace: How to Run Every Race at Your Real Limit](#).

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