



Training for Speed

“How many intervals should I do?”

As a coach I get this question quite a bit. First, by way of definition an “interval” is generally what I call a cruise interval (performed at threshold intensity and tempo pace) or VO2 max interval (performed at VO2 intensity and slightly faster than race pace).

Typically in either case I will assign a workout as follows: Warm up ten minutes. Perform 4-6 intervals of 5 minutes of work with 3 minutes of recovery. Cool down ten minutes.

Assume the above workout is a VO2 max interval session. 4-6 intervals are assigned. How many should the athlete do?

The answer to this depends on the athlete’s ability to recover from the proceeding interval. If an athlete cannot recover, he cannot absorb the stress from the next interval. If he cannot absorb the stress the interval is actually harmful to the athlete. In essence, the athlete is working too hard at this point and risking injury without further gain.

So, how do we measure if an athlete recovered from an interval? We look to see if an athlete’s heart rate returns to the top of Zone 1 (if you don’t know what your heart rate zones are use 120 beats per minute) within 2 minutes of performing an interval. If so, the athlete can perform another interval. If the athlete’s heart rate does not return to the top of Zone 1 in 2 minutes (or 120), the athlete should not do another interval but should go directly to the cool down phase.

In our above workout example, if the athlete performs 4 intervals and then fails to recover, the workout ends. If the athlete performs all 6 intervals and recovers fully after that interval, then the coach and the athlete have a choice to make the next time the athlete does the workout. The coach can assign more intervals, lengthen the intervals, have them performed at faster pace, or some combination of all three. However, by always using the rule of assessing recovery between intervals by monitoring heart rate, a coach and an athlete can make sure an athlete does not do more than is necessary to improve, while reducing the chance for overtraining and injury.