

Light Weights 800 metres

Three reasons why distance runners should lift weights

By [Roy Benson](#) Tuesday, April 3, 2007

I can name three good reasons why distance runners should lift weights. Getting faster is not one of them. It is true that weight training can help make some runners faster. **But only in events from the 800 meters on down** can runners offset the gravitational pull of additional body mass with the improvements in power that come from strength training. That's why sprinters look like Mr. Atlas: because they are pumping iron almost as much as they're pumping their knees up and down the track. Yes, strength training can make you faster . . . up to a point. **That point seems to end at 800 meters.** Skinny Africans get the "strength" to run under 60 seconds per lap x four or more laps by simply running 120 miles per week.

So, what are the reasons why you, especially you grownup distance runners (5K and up) should spend time doing progressive resistance training?

1) To control weight; 2) to maintain good posture; 3) to prevent injuries

First, for better weight control, you should maintain at least the same amount of lean body mass that you had when you were young and in your prime. Why? Because the favorite fuel of muscles is fat as long as there is plenty of oxygen around to help it burn (which is all the time except when we're pushing the oxygen delivery system with fast running). The reason fat is the favorite is simple: fat has twice as many calories of energy per gram as carbohydrate and we can store lots more of it. With greater muscle mass, we can burn more fat during all those other hours of the day when we are not working out anaerobically. We aging adults who are doing fewer and fewer activities that engage all or at least many of our muscles find that we have traded in our eight cylinder gas guzzlers for little four bangers with great economy. Unfortunately, we seldom stop stuffing as many calories into the old gas tank.

Second, for better posture, you need strong muscles that can dominate your skeleton. You need muscles that can order your leg, hip and back bones to stand at attention and stay where they belong. You can't run efficiently without proper posture. Just compare the pack at the front of a marathon with those coming in two or three hours later to see what I mean.

Third, to prevent both running-related, over-use injuries, as well as accidental injuries, you need to have strong muscles with good balance from group to group. Larger muscles are better shock absorbers of foot strike impacts, protecting knee and hip joints. Strong quads and hamstrings can arrest twisting forces on knee joints resulting from awkward foot plants on uneven surfaces. Stronger arm and shoulder muscles allow you to lift things like suitcases and garbage cans without straining your back. Strong muscles protect your spinal column and keep your body weight from mashing down on your vertebrae and squashing your fragile discs. Strong muscles also mean strong, dense bones. There is a direct correlation between muscle strength and the density of the bones they attach to. Injuries interrupt your training. Inconsistency is the hobgoblin of successful racing. If lifting weights helps you train more consistently, pump some pounds.

Here's how to apply the principles of progressive resistance training with weights: by trial and error, select enough weight to lift one set of 10 reps: the weight should make the muscles quiver, struggle and/or burn on the eighth, ninth, and 10th reps. This "overload" tells the muscle fibers that they need to get stronger. Muscles don't like pain, so they adapt to this stress, and within a few [workouts](#) will have gotten strong enough so you'll be able to sail through a set of 10 reps with no struggles. At that point, add more weight

and go through the same overload process. Repeat the overload once more so that you have worked through three increments of resistance.

For example, let's say that you started doing bicep curls and it took 10-pound dumbbells to get that overload burn you wanted. Next, it took 15 pounds; finally, 20 pounds. Those three increments are enough for us skinny distance runners. Any more bulk would just slow us down. For the rest of your life, lift this amount twice a week with three to four days rest in between pumping pounds. One set of 10 reps and then get the heck out of the weight room and home to your family. You've already been gone long enough running all those miles.

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