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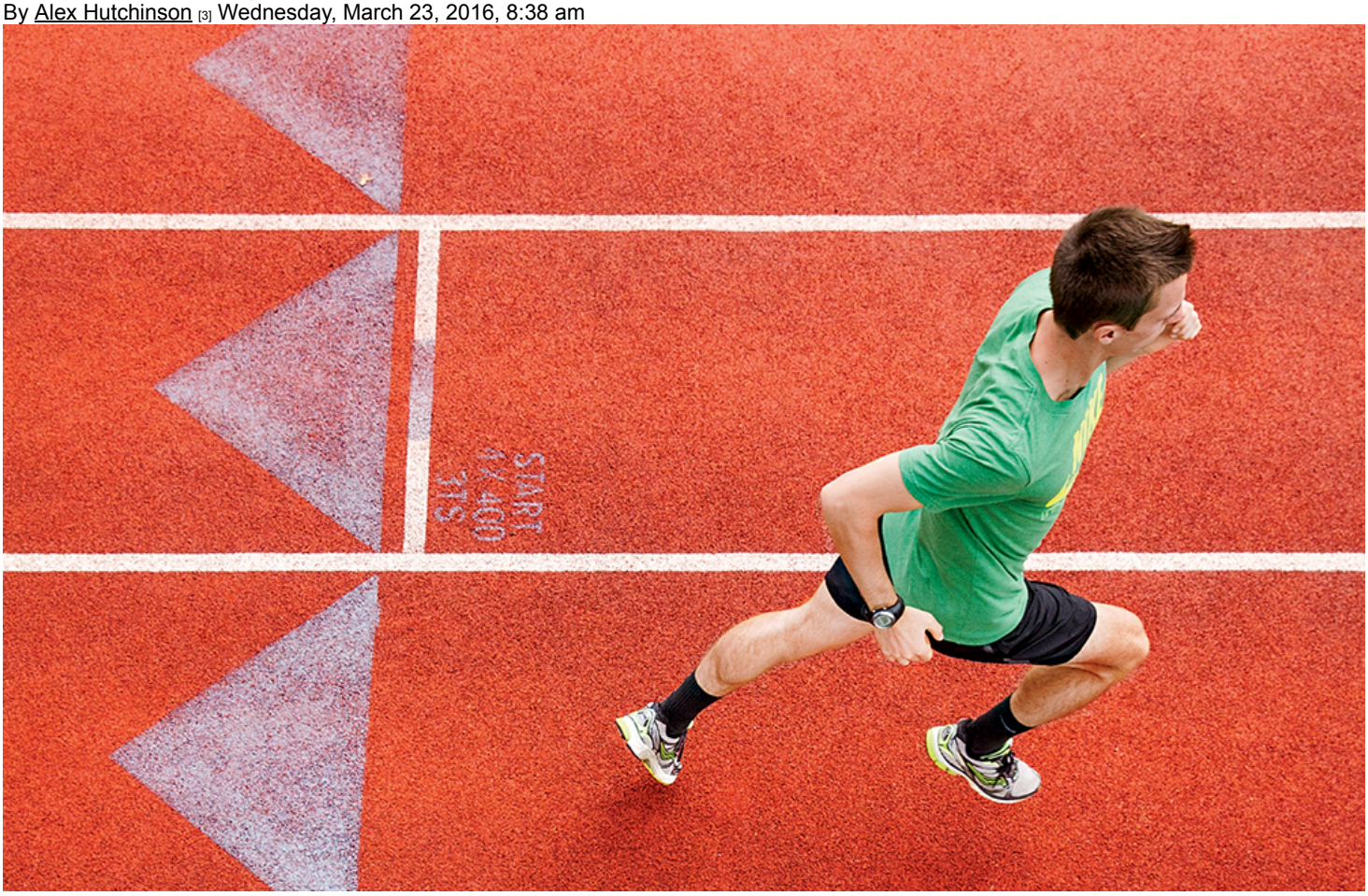
How Unstructured Runs Can Make You Faster

Think you're done? Wrong.
By Alex Hutchinson [3] Wednesday, March 23, 2016, 8:38 am



Amby Burfoot [4], 1968 Boston Marathon [5] champion, RW contributor, and all-around running sage, once revealed the "absolute, no-doubt-in-the-world best running workout you can do." Run 5 x 1 mile as hard as you can with 400-meter recovery jogs—and then, when you've finished, have your coach tell you to do another fast mile. From such workouts, he wrote, "You'll learn forever that you're capable of much more than you think. It's the most powerful lesson you can possibly learn in running."

Burfoot's workout uses deception as a way of tapping into your hidden reserves. You may think you're cooked when you finish a hard workout, but scientists have repeatedly shown that people can actually maintain a similar pace for another few reps after completing a prescribed workout. And the benefits can be substantial. In one study, cyclists who were fooled into riding farther than expected were subsequently able to race 13 percent faster when they knew the correct distance. If you don't have a coach, there are other ways of conducting workouts to introduce uncertainty and surprise that trick you into running farther or faster than you thought possible.

Rest Roulette
Run 10 x 400, with the rest times determined by the 100th-of-a-second digit on your watch after timing each previous rep, multiplied by 20. For example, if the first 400 takes 1:18.36, take 6 x 20 = 120 seconds of rest. Run each interval as if you had 90 seconds of rest (but slow down as needed if you hit a streak of short rests). And be ready for a time that ends in zero, because that means you have to go another lap. Don't get hung up on pace—the goal is to push when you thought you couldn't anymore.

Follow the Leader
With training partners of similar fitness, run an unstructured fartlek in which you take turns leading without telling the others how far or fast the rep will be. For example, four runners could do 12 repetitions so that each person leads three times. The repetitions might last from 30 seconds to five minutes, at mile to half-marathon pace, with a minute or two of recovery. This simulates the challenge of matching a competitor's surge during a race.

Landmark Fartlek

If you’re running solo, replicate the challenge of Follow the Leader by starting and stopping surges depending on unpredictable external events that occur every few minutes. Depending on where you run, that could be passing cars, cyclists, traffic lights, dogs, and so on. If there are lots of pedestrians on your route, surge until you’ve passed 10 of them, then jog until you pass five more, and repeat.

Speed Shuffle
Put an upbeat playlist on shuffle and let the song order dictate your workout. For example, run at 10K pace during tracks with a female singer, then jog during tracks with a male singer, and keep going until you’ve accumulated at least 20 minutes of fast running. You can achieve the same thing by varying genre or artists. Designate one or two tracks that mean you have to surge at mile race pace for a minute, then jog for the rest of the song.

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