THE MINIMAL OPTIMAL OBSTACLE TRAINING PLAN

A quick and easy to apply guide to prepare and optimize your training
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If you are reading this it means you already have a race day approaching on your calendar. Whether it’s your first or your 20th race you must be ready to face the constant unknown, which different terrain, weather conditions, obstacle set and fellowship might bring.

As a sports coach running GRIT CAMP who races both competitively and for fun, I’ve taken plenty of people off their couches and figuratively put their asses into the muddy, rugged trenches of an obstacle race. Because each person was at a different level of personal fitness, I’ve been able to accumulate a lot of knowledge about preparing for a race. Through trial and error I tested what works best and validated ways of training that you can use to excel at your first race or to take your racing to the next (competitive) level.

That is why you, fellow athlete (yes - if you committed to your first race you are already an athlete) are in good hands. In this guide, I’ll take you through the basics of training for an obstacle race. Not to worry, we’ll dive deep into the nitty gritty of it from all sides.

Although every race experience will be unique, you should always have your fitness and your mental game to fall back on. To develop both, you will need a plan so, without further ado, let’s get started forging your extreme endurance, durability and flexibility to adapt.
MINIMAL OPTIMAL TRAINING DOSE

Your training plan consists of two major puzzle pieces. One is running, because obstacle races are a runner’s game. You will need to have running stamina to complete a race. The other piece you’ll need is strength - we’re really going to work on your strength development. Additional pieces will include balance work, agility and dexterity.

Imagine yourself training for the role of one of Marvel’s superhero movies. Dashing through fields with amazing agility; able to run up and down hills like a beast, even with extra weight. (Carrying extra weight is one of the most common obstacles.) Pick a superhero that fits this profile and keep his image in your mind. Now let’s begin your transformation.

RUNNING AND ENDURANCE

What I see too often in training is that people primarily focus on acquiring strength, working on that ‘beastmode’. They don’t run often - maybe once a week.

I’ve spoken to a lot of obstacle racers, through racing and conducting interviews for GRIT CAMP, and I’ve yet to meet one who wouldn’t emphasize the importance of running in this sport. In fact, some of my interviewees said running was a game changer for their performance.

If you can’t run or wouldn’t necessarily describe yourself as a runner - that’s ok. Don’t quit this guide right away. It doesn’t take much to rewire that mentality, for you to start running more and become at least a decent runner. Despite what you might think, to run well and to enjoy doing it, you needn’t be a lunatic spending 20 hours per week running trails (though you can do that if you really wish). Rather we’ll optimise your training to achieve incredible results with minimum running effort, i.e. the minimal optimal dose.

THE FUNDAMENTALS & HOW TO RUN SMARTER

First of all, you should define what race you’re preparing for so that you can train your body and mind accordingly. One question I’m often asked is how far a person should aim to run during training in order to dominate an X-mile race with obstacles. Note the emphasis on obstacles there.
I use this simple table to identify running requirements and answer the above question effectively:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>RACE DISTANCE (BASED ON SPARTAN RACE DISTANCES)</th>
<th>HOW FAR SHOULD YOU RUN TO BE READY?</th>
<th>HOW MANY MILES A WEEK SHOULD YOU TOTAL (USUALLY SPREAD OVER 3-4 RUNS)?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3 mi</td>
<td>2-3 mi</td>
<td>10 mi*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 mi</td>
<td>5-7 mi</td>
<td>15 mi*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12 mi</td>
<td>9-12 mi</td>
<td>27 mi*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* What? **You mean I can run shorter distances during training and still dominate the actual race?** Indeed you can. Running fewer miles might sound counterintuitive, but we’ll be smarter about the way we collect those miles. In the end, you might find yourself just as ready, if not better prepared, than someone running paced 6-mile runs all the time.

**Running smarter is the effective method I use to help people prepare for their races. It encompasses 3 types of essential running sessions spread throughout the week, which should prepare you for your race:**

**Session 1: HIIT (high intensity interval training)**

By replacing one or two of endurance runs you might already be doing, with weighted sprints, hill runs and general HIIT activities you could actually boost your endurance so much that you’ll surprise yourself the next time you have to ‘endure’. HIIT based workouts are the most effective at increasing an athlete’s VO2Max, keeping the body lean and strengthening skeletal muscles.

Here’s a simple protocol you can follow to incorporate HIIT into your training routine:

4 sets of 2-3 minute sprints, followed by 1-2 minute brisk walks.

Focus on speed and of course good form.

**Session 2: Hill Runs**

A pet peeve for many racers yet an all-too-common obstacle, running up and down hills is where knee or IT band problems usually come into play for those who are unprepared.
So - the first thing you should do is find a hill or a big flight of stairs nearby. A treadmill won’t do, because you need to get used to running downhill as well. You should then set a numeric goal for how many times you will run up and down this hill or stairs, choosing a number that’s achievable at the moment. In the weeks leading up to the race, you should increase this number by 1-2. If running up and down is too easy for you, do enlist a sandbag or a kettlebell. Carrying sandbags while running simulates actual race conditions.

Session 3: The Endurance Run

The last of the triad and by far the most important piece is a steady-paced endurance run in a steady pace. Run the amount you will have to run during the race. So if it’s a 3-mile race, you should run 3 miles. Start out slow (remember the goal is to endure not to sprint), be mindful of your running form and build the capacity from there. What truly matters here is that you are able to maintain elevated heartbeat and move your legs without giving up (mentally or physically) for the amount of time it might require to finish the race.

As you can see this plan hardly adds up to running 3x3 miles if it’s a 3-mile run you are preparing for. This is not a shortcoming however. The first two of your three runs will be much shorter but they will be action packed. By diversifying your runs in this way you’ll build a well rounded runners profile, making you ready to tackle hills, perform dashes and to endure whatever length of the field.

Tip:
If you want to go further in simulating race conditions, you should superset your runs with strength activities involving the whole body. For example, you could add burpees, monkeybars or wall climbs to split up your mileage. For a 3-mile run, you could aim to do 30 burpees at every 0.62 miles (1km) of the run. Overall time doesn’t matter here, but do try to push the burpees out as quickly as possible.
STRENGTH, BALANCE AND DEXTERITY TRAINING

Bodyweight exercises should be enough to prepare you if this is your very first obstacle race. However if it’s not your first time, you might want to invest in one of the following items to help you get stronger:

- **Kettlebell** (weight relative to your abilities)
- **Sandbag** (you can make one yourself or use a backpack with a kettlebell inside it - I call this the ghetto weighted bag)

Most people I introduce to obstacle races are immediately put on a diet, a kettlebell training diet that is. Nothing beats the conditioning and strength wins of using this badboy.

There are countless full-body and movement-specific exercises you can do with a kettlebell, but today we’ll just focus on the ‘holy trinity’. When mastered these can be essential in preparing you for race domination:

1. **Kettlebell Swings**

   A godly exercise I do a couple of times a week via tabata* sets as a great warmup. This will build a core strong as a tree trunk and it’ll work your heart to the max. If you’d have to pick just one exercise to condition yourself for an obstacle race, this should be it.

2. **Pullups**

   A trying exercise but the easiest way to crush a whole

*Tabata is a type of HIIT described before. It was first introduced by prof. I.Tabata in 1996 with the intention to help Olympian speedseekers. The best part of it is that it’s done in under 4mins. That’s right, just 4 minutes split into 20 seconds of extreme intensity movement followed by 10 seconds of rest for countless reps. Pro tip: check spotify ‘tabata music’ (no affiliation) for a guided tabata workout with audio feedback.
set of common obstacles - monkey bars, the rig, the Hercules hoist and any other obstacle requiring massive pulling force. If you can’t do a pullup just yet, work up to it by doing timed hangs or the crossfit-style kipping pullups.

Importantly, you should introduce other pulling motions, to maximise your efforts and eventually pull off your first pullup. I’ve written a whole guide on this over at GRIT CAMP: http://grit.camp/how-to-do-your-first-pull-up/

**Aim to do as many dead hang Sealfit-style pullups as possible for as many sets as manageable.**

### 3. Burpees

Created by Dr. Burpee and made popular in the world of OCR by Spartan Races, burpee is the kettlebell swing of bodyweight exercise. It’s a full body movement that conditions the hell out of you.

It is said that the average amount of burpees a person has to do as a penalty during a Spartan Race is 90. I’m not sure how much truth there is in that, but even 90 burpees in a wild environment, when you’ve already overcome maybe ten obstacles with more to go, can be absolutely shattering.

**Aim to do at least 100 burpees while you train.**

Just remember that you can and should be entirely flexible with the way these exercises line up in your training schedule. If you are not rested or fully recovered from a previous training day, do take a rest day. Alternatively, you can also fill that day with yoga, light stretching and a long walk or a light jog.
### PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER: TRAINING WORKSHEET

#### WEEK 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DAY 1</th>
<th>DAY 2</th>
<th>DAY 3</th>
<th>DAY 4</th>
<th>DAY 5</th>
<th>DAY 6</th>
<th>DAY 7</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>HILL RUNS, BURPEES</td>
<td>KETTLEBELL SWINGS, PULLUPS</td>
<td>HIIT, BURPEES</td>
<td>REST</td>
<td>KETTLEBELL SWINGS, PULLUPS</td>
<td>ENDURANCE RUNS, BURPEES</td>
<td>REST</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

#### WEEK 2

<table>
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<tr>
<th>DAY 1</th>
<th>DAY 2</th>
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<th>DAY 4</th>
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<td>ENDURANCE RUNS</td>
<td>REST</td>
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</table>

This is a basic 2 week model which allows you to easily alternate the capacity and workload in order to boost recovery on following weeks. Note that rest days are absolutely essential, I am not going to dive into recovery principles since that could fill in 500 pages. However in order to enhance your best performance and achieve greater results you must take rest days as seriously as training ones.

As mentioned before these should be a staple and foundation building exercises, which can be supersetted with what you’ve been training day to day. If on strenght and conditioning days you want to add additional sets of rowing, deadlifts or any other developmental movements - feel free.

### Tip:

*Train in the same gear you will wear during the race. This will eliminate any outstanding issues with blistering feet because of the unbroken shoes or chaffing from untested shirts, shorts and underwear etc.*
DOING BIGGER RACES DOES NOT MEAN MORE TRAINING

Hopefully by now you understand that doing bigger races doesn’t mean you’ll need a whole new training plan. This plan is all about getting you to train smart, so that you don’t have to spend hours training every day but you can still finish a race with a good result. And yes, this does include the bigger races like Tough Mudders, Spartan Beast races and others. If you already train smart, you won’t need to assign more time to your training when there’s suddenly a longer-distance race on the horizon. There is no truth in thinking that to prepare for a 12-mile race, you need to collect 12 miles during every training run you do.

The smart way to collect mileage is to increase the capacity of your weekly endurance run. So if you’re currently running a 6-mile endurance race, when preparing for a longer race, you should add an additional half-mile to every single run until you’re making 70% of the final race distance.

Being able to run that 70% at your desired time and pace will be enough to not only run for fun, but to also join a competitive (elite) heat. What about the other 30%, you might ask. Remember that you still have two other running days, with HIIT and hills which will add up to form the full 100%. From personal experience I can tell you that it’s those hill runs and sprints you complete during training, that will give you the boost once you’re running in the race.

As competitive OCR athlete Ben O’Rourke stated in an interview we conducted with him on GRIT CAMP, it is not about the amount or the distance of training, but the quality what brings the best results.
We know our brain is split into two parts – the right (creative) and the left (logical), which is used more frequently in day-to-day scenarios. What is interesting is the benefits, which occur if both of those sides are engaged at the same time in a balanced capacity, firing up neuro-pathways and linking up both sides.

Visualisation manipulates emotions and feelings through the use of imagery. Put it into this basic scheme: your mind produces emotions, which are then turned into feelings and transcribed into physical sensations. Using visualisation can help eliminate negative emotions and embodied experiences, which might hinder your racing career.

For example, let’s say you rolled your ankle last season. This directly affected your confidence and is now automatically regarded by your mind as a weak spot, or a spot which can break again. This example is one of the possible and very standardised negative and embodied emotions. It has been proven that these negative patterns can translate into a set of physical manifestations that are very common for active athletes (obstacle racers even so): lowered immune system, depressed mental function and capability, and directly affected confidence and performance.

Speaking of which, visualisation as a practice can help boost self confidence or in a way desensitise some of those negative emotions. Ancient tales tell of Japanese samurais who, before deadly battles, would go through every single possible death scenario (negative emotional patterns) and visualise these experiences translating them into physical sensations. This would ‘prepare’ their mind and body and change their behaviour in the trenches drastically, because – simply put – they were not afraid of anything. They had already considered all possible outcomes and thought through them beforehand.

You too can implement a simple visualisation technique, to help yourself overcome the various obstacles you’ll encounter. Here’s how you can practice to fight through the trenches or bumpy life roads with confidence:

1. Begin by allocating time to not doing anything, e.g. 15 mins with no phone, no internet and no people. No other things to be done. I, myself, like to do this early in the morning, before racing or right before going to sleep.

2. Define your objective, goal or an aim in as much detail as possible.
3. Absolutely clear your mind from the usual ego dialog by concentrating on your breathing. You can and should practice this in general to relieve naturally-occurring anxiety, overwhelm of day to day activities and other such mental burdens.

4. Begin by visualising an image, a clear mental snapshot you can recall again and again. If your goal is to become a champion, picture yourself at the finish line with a medal around your neck and a big grin on your face. You should always practice overcoming negative thoughts on a specific scenario (just like the samurais did).

5. Once the relation is achieved you can move on into transcribing those feelings, which should translate into physical sensations (elevated heartbeat, perspiration, minor muscle contractions – similar to what you would be experiencing if the scenario were really happening):

   – Visualise having already achieved your identified goal
   – Place yourself into that situation
   – Hear yourself speaking as that person
   – See yourself performing within the new role/situation

Do this twice daily and you will virtually rewire your brain to aim for a specific experience and your body will be used to such physical sensations. Simply put, this will encourage you to take action and achieve your goals. It will also boost your mental game with direct impact on your confidence, self-belief and GRIT.

“The best day to start was yesterday, so the next best day to start is today”

Hal Elrod