

# How to Run Faster, Longer, and Stronger

Interview with Coach Armand Crespo by Dr. Steve Smith

On my office wall are the yearly group photos of the Pasadena Pacers. Friends often hover over those photos to see if they are in it; they look for friends. They brace themselves for the changes caused by ravages of time as they expect to look older, less vital. There is a big surprise in store for them: time turns its ravage away from runners, in pursuit of those who don't exercise. It seems our runners actually look younger and more fit and vital with the passing of years!

But you have to keep running to make it into the next photo and onto that wall. To do that you'll have to train like a pro.

Training, running, and injuries are ever present discussions around runners. Here's a recent discussion with one most successful coaches I know, Armand Crespo:

**Armand Crespo (AC):** Running is a metaphor for life; how you train, persistence, ability to handle pain, the urge to quit when it is difficult, and achievement are all transferrable attributes. Show me a runner who can persevere and you'll see it in their careers. People are drawn to high achievers, looking to bask in their achievement and draw inspiration from people of character.

**Dr. Smith (DS):** What does it mean to train like a pro?

**AC:** A professional has a plan, sticks to it, but makes adjustments according to life situations. Most of the amateur runners I work with have very busy lives. Important life decisions pop up, family situations, stress, illness, and all manner of unexpected circumstances come about, so you have to be able to adjust to your training to adapt. Otherwise people will overtrain, overstress their bodies, and get hurt. A systematic approach toward training with a long view leading to the achievement of a goal is the most important step in the plan.

**DS:** What factors do you take into account when you create a training plan for your runners?

**AC:** Experienced runners often want to tell you about their glory days; however, you have to base a plan on their fitness *right now*. You really have to know three factors:

1. What is their training volume right now?
2. How intense is the training right now?
3. When was the last long run and how far was it?

We are looking at what has been going on over the last three to four weeks. You have to take into account that there is a very rapid decline in VO2 Max. In just **three** days you can lose 70% of your VO2 Max. If you are racing this is vital especially when working out tempo runs, interval training, and tapering.

**DS:** For our readers, VO2 max is the amount of oxygen your body can use during an intense workout. It determines how much “gas” you have when you put the pedal to the metal. Hard workouts such as mile repeats or tempo runs will increase your VO2 max very quickly. In just two weeks, a dramatic effect can be achieved with a well-designed training plan.

**AC:** Runners often want to start out with intense workouts on the track or tempo runs. You really have to look at training volume before getting into max exertion runs, otherwise they are just going to break under the training stress and get injured. I like to see runners putting in a lot of miles—get out and run lots of “junk miles”. These are the easy miles just getting miles on your feet to get your body to adapt.

**DS:** Really building slow twitch fiber muscles, the machinery to do the work of distance running.

**AC:** Right. You have to apply a training stress which forces your body to adapt to it. That’s how you get stronger.

**DS:** What is the biggest training challenge for an endurance athlete?

**AC:** Avoiding peaks and valleys in their training schedule. Runners go out and run 16 miles on Saturday after only having run a total of 5 to 8 miles during the week. The long run doesn't have the mileage to support it. You really have to avoid valleys of low mileage in your training schedule. I would rather see a runner out there consistently and doing lower total volume, say 30 miles a week at 3 miles a day than a runner who is doing a 22 miler on Saturday with no miles during the week. That's just too much stress on your muscles. You've got to be consistent with your training and runners who get this part right for the first time will have huge improvement in their performance on the long run. And, it doesn't take long for consistency to really start paying off. Runners who maintain consistent training stress will become good endurance athletes.

**DS:** What is the ideal training volume for a marathon runner?

**AC:** A big change occurs at 30 miles a week. This volume causes enough adaptation to strengthen muscles and metabolic systems enough to transform a runner into an endurance athlete. There are more breakthroughs to be had at higher training volumes but you have to take into account the **runner's** personal energy requirements from the work, stress, physical wellness, and family involvement. A runner who only trains and doesn't take these factors into account can get out of balance and motivation may suffer.

**DS:** How often should runners do hard workouts?

**AC:** Never more than two days a week for hard, maximal effort workouts. Tempo runs and mile repeats should only be 20% of your workout in a week.

**DS:** Do you use motivation as part of your training plan?

**AC:** Don't get me wrong here but runners who have a "warrior mentality" usually don't last long. They get injured because they exert themselves way too hard in relation to their training level. There is no motivation like having the confidence that comes from having trained well and showing up on race day having gained the strength and speed to run the race of your life. Now that's motivating! Positive thinking without the physical prowess to support it is a good way to get your ass kicked.

New runners in my training program need motivation because they think they are training at 100% when they really had reserves they didn't use. They need to be shown they have more ability than they are using. They don't usually like it when I push them to go harder, but the results gained from pushing harder can be spectacular.

**DS:** How do you determine training and tempo paces for your runners?

**AC:** I start them out on a timed mile run and try to find your current 100% effort. On week 2, I do it again with a two-mile timed run adding 30 seconds per mile to their pace, and then again on week 3. I'll get an accurate sense of their ability level, then base their tempo runs on 85-90% of their max effort.

**DS:** What are your go-to coaching tips for optimizing their running gait?

**AC:** Lift up your chest and keep your chin up. This allows you to breathe more efficiently. Keeping your chest up really improves your form, giving you a more efficient gait. Your feet should be fully weighted by the time they are midway beneath your hips. You should only have light contact on your feet anytime your feet are ahead of your hips. You should swing your arms with enthusiasm and reach back almost as if you are picking your back pocket.

Your lower back should be slightly rounded, shoulder forward, like a child. Run like a child and you'll feel lighter on your feet and it will be gentler on your spine.