

3+ Training: A strategy for post-collegiate track and field training

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Last updated: November 2009

I. Introduction

The “3+” training program outlined here is designed for the busy athlete who is committed to making track and field training a priority, but has significant time constraints on his or her schedule.

Track and field athletes who wish to compete after college, but who are not able to or do not wish to make training their full time occupation, face an often vexing training question: If I can’t do everything the elite athletes do, how do I figure out which aspects of training are most essential? This short document presents my thinking about this “middle-ground” of training – how much and what kind of training is necessary for a busy track and field athlete who still wants to compete after college?

II. Annual Planning: Realistic Ambition

As with any training program, an athlete should make clear (in writing and if possible to a coach or training partner) what his/her goals are. The post-collegiate athlete should be both ambitious and realistic in setting expectations. Ambition and realism cut against each other, but both are essential in developing a training plan. Being ambitious allows us to achieve at levels above others’ expectations. Being realistic keeps us from developing a program that we can’t possibly follow through on. Specific goals should be developed in consultation with a coach / training partner, and should take into account past performance, current health, and likely training quality in the upcoming season.

In conjunction with setting expectations, athletes should also decide what time commitment they are going to make to training. A fundamental question to consider is: what is the minimal amount of time I need to invest in order to make this worthwhile? Unlike other activities, such as playing pickup basketball at the local gym, competing in events like the hurdles simply cannot be done effectively without at least a minimal commitment. What is that minimum?

As the title of this training program makes clear, my view is that an athlete must commit to ***at least three training sessions a week*** if they want to compete in track and field events. Note that I use the word *compete*. If your goal is just to *participate* (e.g. just to run a mile), then you can do even less. But my focus is on competition, and specifically on competition at a level that you will still be happy with. No one wants to walk on to the track and be embarrassed.

Three workouts a week is the *minimum* required, and if you can, you want to get in more work. But there is an important reason that I have framed the program as 3+. When athletes compare their post-collegiate training to their college experiences (when

they were training every day with the team), it can often lead to the psychologically difficult experience of athletes feeling that “I am not training enough.” This is due in part to what psychologists call the “anchoring effect”. Here, we judge the current number of training hours as insufficient because our anchor (against which we compare) is the college experience of 6-7 days of training per week. If we change the anchor to 3 days a week, then we make a different judgment about our training weeks.

For instance, let’s say you’ve just completed four training sessions in the past week. Rather than thinking, “I didn’t do that fifth workout and I’m probably going to suffer because of it” you can think, “Great! Not only did I get my three core workouts in, I also did an extra strength session. I am going to be faster because of it.”

III. Weekly Planning

Many training programs will provide suggestions for the “microcycle” – how you structure your week of workouts. Here, I want to address an additional issue that often gets overlooked: how to effectively schedule workouts amidst other commitments.

First, remember that however you schedule your training, in order to train at all you need to **stay injury free**. In developing your weekly training plan, this means that you must factor in adequate rest time. Be aware of the factors that may prevent adequate recovery, e.g. poor sleep or nutrition. As you choose the type and sequencing of your training sessions, be realistic about your schedule. For instance, if your work schedule is particularly hectic on Mondays and you always end up with very low sleep on Sunday night, then Monday is clearly not a good day to schedule a tough training session. As you get older, also be aware that your body doesn’t recover the way it did when you were 18. This is especially true if you’re not regularly stretching and icing.

As you plan your week, identify the 3 (or more) days that you will train. Base your selection on when other commitments are likely to emerge. Even when injuries aren’t stopping you, other things might. For example, I’ve identified four legitimate reasons for why I don’t train: Family / Friends, Rest, Travel, and Work.

In my workout log (and if you’re not keeping a workout log, you definitely should) every day that is a no training (nt) day includes a note about why I didn’t train. Looking at the patterns in your log will help you figure out what’s taking up your time.

This leads to one final observation on scheduling a training week – the importance of training partners. If you find that your reason for not training is simply a lack of motivation, or if you find yourself not enjoying the training, it’s a good bet that a training partner (or ideally, a training group) will make a big difference. Even more cool, if your training partners become friends, then you’ll have even more motivation to get to the track. It’s hard to over-emphasize the importance of training groups!

IV. Which three training sessions?

Assuming that you've been able to carve out (at least) three days for training sessions, we return now to our earlier, and very difficult question: which three training sessions should you choose to do? I can't get too specific (that should be a conversation with your coach), but I can offer some general advice that might be useful. I am thinking mostly of hurdlers, but some of this will apply generally to sprinters as well. Field event work will require much more technical, event-specific work than I outline here.

My view on the workouts, in order of importance, that hurdlers and sprinters should do each week are:

Hurdlers	Sprinters
1. High intensity workout 1 (with hurdles when appropriate / feasible)	1. High intensity workout 1
2. High intensity workout 2	2. High intensity workout 2
3. Hurdling day – technique / speed / strength	3. Sprinting technique work, esp. work with blocks
4. Strength training	4. Strength training
5. Extra hurdling day	5. Extra strength day
6. Extra strength day	6. Extra quickness / speed work

The specific details of a “high intensity” training session will depend on where you are in your training year. Earlier in the season, during General Preparation, you will be doing different workouts than you will be when you're peaking in the summer. The important thing in terms of scheduling is that you are committing to a full training session on those days, with a comprehensive warm-up, a focused workout, and a good cool-down and stretch afterwards. These are not days when you just wake up and run a few miles outside.

Again, it's worth emphasizing that ideally you want to be training more than 3 days. But, the point of this document is to emphasize that even if you can't do all of that extra work, you can still have a productive, fun season of track competition!