



## **Coach's Corner, Buffalo Stampede**

**By Brendan Davies**

### **Part 6: Sharpening Up Your Training**

With just on 6 weeks to go before the Buffalo Stampede races, it's time to start transitioning out of the base building, high mileage phase of the training cycle and moving into the Sharpening Phase. This is a crucial part of the training macro cycle and the phase where significant improvements in fitness can be gained. It's important to note that the Sharpening Phase is not the same as Taper Phase; rather it is the 3 week lead in period to the 2-3 week taper. The taper phase will be covered in Week 8 of Coach's Corner.

Up until now I'm hoping that your training has been exhausting! Lots of endurance building, aerobically challenging miles. Big long runs, perhaps even your longest run has been this weekend gone; mixed in with a stack of 'easy' running. You should be feeling a little worn out. This is normal and this is good, you're right on track! The good news is now you can begin to ease off the large weekly miles and begin to target specific workouts designed to achieve your goal at the Stampede. During the sharpening phase, you should begin to feel rested and this is when you can start introducing higher intensity workouts; an example is of course hill workouts where you get to put into practise the technique tips offered in last week's Coach's Corner.

#### **What does the Sharpening Phase look like?**

It is a period when overall mileage is reduced, including the volume of the long run. Some easier sessions are now being replaced with higher intensity sessions such as speed sessions, hill workouts and more 'race pace' aerobic runs. Rest days should also increase to give your body ample time to recover for and from the harder sessions.

#### **Why have a Sharpening Phase?**

The benefits of the Sharpening Phase (and taper) are many. Probably the biggest however is that backing off the mileage and introducing more rest and anaerobic sessions will improve your running efficiency. When backing of the overall volume your legs will gain strength and the mechanics of your running form will improve with faster sessions. Your speed and leg turnover will increase; and this you can bet will always be something you will benefit from no matter the terrain. The

sharpening phase will also give your mind some rest as you ease back from the stressors of a heavy training load as you begin to focus on the task ahead.

### **Should I still be doing my long runs?**

Yes, absolutely. However, you may want to now start slowly decreasing the overall volume of some of the long run session and perhaps start introducing some consecutive day long runs, such as 30km/20km weekends for the Ultra and 25/18km for the Marathon. These type of sessions will simulate the fatigue that you will feel in the race.

Another great long run session during this phase is the 'race pace' long run. Decrease the volume but increase the intensity to a pace that you feel is working you harder. No one really knows their 'race pace' especially for a unique event like the Stampede. So a good rule of thumb is perhaps up to 80% of your 10km flat road pace. These kind of runs will give you the opportunity to optimise lactate levels and gain a good understanding of your race pace and allow you to adapt this for race specific efforts.

### **What type of sessions should I be introducing?**

Up until now, most runners will have been concentrating primarily on building up a solid aerobic base to cover the time that they will be aiming for at the Stampede. We are now going to shift the focus somewhat and try to make a little 'icing to put on the cake'. However, we must be super cautious as adding speed and harder anaerobic sessions can be a double edged sword. It is vital that we sufficiently rest so as to avoid injuries by suddenly introducing faster workouts.

Just like you did through your base building stage, introduce these sessions gradually over the next 3 weeks. Build the speed and the intensity up slowly – the last thing we need now is to jeopardise all our hard work by tearing a hamstring! Do not ever begin a speed session if you don't feel properly recovered from the previous runs you've done in the days leading into the speed session.

Speed work can take a number of forms:

- **Fartlek** - "speed play" runs with varying intensity from easy training pace to race pace. Generally these are fairly unstructured and will be done on varied terrain. A typical fartlek example may be a 3km warm-up on trail followed by 5 x 3min surges run at 5k race pace. Between each surge the runner will jog along 2-3min. At the end of the surges the runner will cool-down for another 3kms. These runs help improve a runner's aerobic strength, handle and react to surges typically experienced in a race and deal with the varied terrain they will see during the Stampede races.
- **Tempo Runs** - these are runs structured to hold a certain pace for a longer period of time or distance. A typical tempo run may be a 4km warm-up with the runner working right into a tempo of a 6km run at 10km race pace followed by 4km cool-down. Tempo runs teach the runner to run at race pace for an extended period of time and will increase your lactate threshold levels.
- **Intervals**- most intervals are done on the track. Generally they are faster than either fartleks or tempos. Short, fast intervals will have a runner run at near their maximum aerobic pace. A common short interval might be 8 x 400m run at 5km race pace with 1min jog between each. A key component of intervals is incomplete rest. The runner should still be mildly fatigued

when beginning the next interval. This will improve aerobic strength. These are also a great opportunity to hone your technique as discussed in Week 3 of Coach's Corner.

- **Hill Repeats** – these are the most specific sessions for the Stampede and arguably due to the nature of the course you have all probably already done lots of these in your base building stage. If not, now is the time to start. Don't forget to include lots of walking repeats too. A good hill session is 10 x 300m hard efforts uphill on a hill of around 8-9% gradient with a recovery walk down.

Throughout the Sharpening Phase you should try to complete at least one speed session per week. This could increase to multiple depending on your own preferences and reactions to the workouts. For example an older or novice runner may do less speed work where a more competitive or younger runner may do more. The ability for a runner to recover from speed work is also a critical factor. This is where your own judgment is vital.