



SEPTEMBER 27, 2014



Matt Ostrander, aka "Coach O"

How to Train for the Birkie Trail Run Marathon and Half Marathon

Part 2 of a 3-Part Series

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“The Long Run, Tempo Run, Recovery, Taper, and More”

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SEPTEMBER 27, 2014

<http://www.birkie.com/run/events/birkie-trail-run>

Note: If you plan to run the marathon course or parts of it before the event, please take the Course Description and the map from the [Birkie Trail Run](#) with you. The course is marked in some areas—like turns onto the singletrack sections—with pink arrows, but it is not yet completely marked as it will be on race day. Enjoy!



Disclaimer: The following training tips are one approach to preparing for a long-distance running event. Please explore and consult other training plans that may be a better match for you when it comes to the optimal distance for your long runs. And, please consult with your physician before entering a long-distance event or following any training plan, advice, or tips, especially if you are new to running and/or running long distance.

Part One -- General Strategy and Tips on Training for a Trail Marathon

If you're reading this, there's a good chance you're thinking about running the marathon or half marathon at the Birkie Trail Run & Trek on September 27. As someone who's put in a lot of miles on the Birkie Trail, and coached hundreds of runners, I thought I'd give you a few pointers. In this article I'll address good training strategy for a trail marathon or half marathon; the next article will focus on the peculiarities of the Birkie Trail; and in Part Three I'll go over specific preparations for race day and some tips for the race.

Training for a marathon or half marathon on the Birkie Trail is similar to other marathon training plans that you'll find on the Internet, with a few differences due to the hills. The key elements of

the program are four: LSD (long, slow distance), threshold training, strength, and recovery. Of course, it's also important to do as much of your running as possible on trails.

LSD – This is the most important aspect of your training, in terms of being able to finish the marathon or half marathon and actually enjoy it. I have a friend who will go out and grind through an endurance event on little or no training, spend a week or two on crutches, and say “never again” for the next half a year. I prefer to go into the race knowing I will finish without injuring myself, so I can focus on either enjoying the course and companions or kicking butt.

For the marathon, my approach is to build up to where you're running 20-24 miles your last three long runs before the event. (The exact number of miles will depend on your overall level of fitness and training—beginner, intermediate, or advanced.) These last three long runs should be done two weeks apart, to provide time for recovery between them. Remember, these long runs should be run at a conversational pace and a minute-per-mile slower than your goal race pace.

On the weekends in between your long runs, you will do a progression run of half the length of your current long run. A progression run is where you start out easy for the first quarter of the run, gradually pick up the pace for the middle miles, and end with an easy cool down for the last 15 minutes.

Schedule your last long run for three weeks before Race Day. Two weeks before the marathon, just do 12 miles, and a week before the race, just do 8. That last week, taper down to nothing on the day before the race.

For the half marathon, the overall strategy is the same, except the magic number for your last three long runs is 10-12 miles. Two weeks before the race, just do 8 miles, and a week before the race, just do 6. Again, that last week, taper down to nothing on the day before the race.

NOTE: Try to incorporate as much hilly terrain as possible into your long runs to prepare for your event on the Birkie Trail. Also, use your LSD run to practice the drinks and food that you're likely to use on race day. Aid stations at the Birkie Trail Run & Trek will provide HEED energy, electrolyte sports drink by Hammer and GU energy gel.

Threshold training – Chances are, if your competitor has a better anaerobic threshold (AT) than you, you'll only have a minute or two to admire the back of her T-shirt. Your AT is the pace at which you begin to cross over into the unpleasantness of oxygen debt, heavy legs, and increasingly labored breathing. A person's AT is the product of genetics, training, conditions, and how well recovered he or she is. Improve your AT before race day by running a tempo workout every other week, and a cruise interval workout in the alternating weeks.

To do a tempo run, warm up easy for 10 minutes, then run for 15 minutes at the fastest pace at which you can cruise comfortably. I usually push it until I start to feel labored breathing, then back off slightly. If your breathing pattern is 2/2—that is, 2 footsteps for the inhale and 2 steps for the exhale—you're still OK. If you cross into the 2/1 zone, you've passed your AT. After 15 minutes at threshold pace, cool down at an easy pace for 10 minutes. When you get into good enough shape that you want to make it harder, either increase the hard portion to 20 minutes,

or break it into two sessions of 15 minutes each, with a 5-minute recovery jog in between.

Cruise intervals are a series of repetitions at (or only slightly faster than) the AT pace described above. A marathoner might build up to doing 5-6 repetitions of 1 mile each, or 8-10 reps of 1K each. Recovery between reps is 5 minutes easy jogging. Of course, you would warm up and cool down for 10 minutes on each end of the workout. This winds up being a 10-12 mile workout, so plan an easy workout for the next day.

For the half marathon, I would do 6 repetitions of 1K each, with 4 minutes of easy jogging between reps.

Strength – The Birkie Trail is very hilly, and you must prepare for that. If you live near the Birkie Trail, the Superior Hiking Trail, or hillier portions of the Ice Age Trail, you're all set. If you live in the flatlands, find the biggest hill around and do repeats on it. Once a week, do a moderately long run (10 miles for marathoners, or 8 miles for half marathoners) on your hilly trail, and work the uphills hard. Run easy for the first and last 10 minutes, and run easy on the downhills and flats. When you're charging a hill, concentrate on running tall with your head up, shortening your stride, and using your arms more. Keep your stride very quick and light. As I approach a hill, I'll say something to myself like, "Ah, another hill. Fortunately, I am weightless and fast."

Remember that on Race Day, you will not work the hills. More on that in Part Two of this series.

Recovery – You have three hard workouts to do each week: the LSD, the speed (tempo or intervals), and the strength (hills). Each of these workouts should be preceded by an easy recovery workout, and it doesn't hurt to take one day a week off totally. My usual training strategy is to go fast on Tuesdays, do hills on Thursdays, LSD on Saturdays, drink beer Saturday night, and take Sunday off. Monday, Wednesday, and Friday are slow runs of 4-8 miles each, on soft surfaces.

The Secret Ingredient – Every once in a while in a race, but especially in a trail marathon, I am able to edge out a runner who is really in better shape, thanks to this Secret Ingredient in my training: I practice running down hills fast. You can do this on recovery days, whenever the opportunity presents itself. Whenever you get a downhill that's not too steep, has good footing, and isn't paved, RUN down it. Don't just let gravity take you down, but actively run it. Go faster by increasing your stride rate (faster turnover), NOT by taking too-long strides. If you take long strides, reaching out past your center of gravity with that footstrike, and landing on your heel with a straight leg (as is common on a downhill), you're sending tremendous shock straight up that leg column and into your knees and hips. Keep your foot plant directly under your belly button.

After a few weeks of practicing downhill running, you'll be able to go unbelievably fast without hurting yourself. Another benefit of this drill is that it's fun.

To sum up, a two-week plan can look like this:

Week 1:

Sunday—Off

Monday—Moderate distance, slow

Tuesday—Tempo run
Wednesday—Moderate distance, slow
Thursday—Hill workout
Friday—Short and easy recovery run
Saturday—LSD

Week 2:

Sunday—Off
Monday—Moderate distance, slow
Tuesday—Cruise intervals
Wednesday—Moderate distance, slow
Thursday—Hill workout
Friday—Short and easy recovery run
Saturday—Moderate distance, progression

That's about as specific as I can get, without knowing your current mileage, goal race pace and distance, and available training venues. If you have questions or would like help developing an individualized training plan, please email me at mathewostrander1@gmail.com.

Heading out to scout the course this summer? The map of the course on the Birkie website gives you a good overall picture of the course, but if you're going to try the course on your own before race day, I recommend the map at this page:

<http://www.cambatrails.org/page/show/1050115-cable-area-silent-sports-map>. The area bounded by Timber Trail Road on the south, Spider Lake Fire Lane on the east, McNaught Road on the north, and Randysek Road on the west is an area where it's easy to mistake a snowshoe trail for a bike trail, or the Classic Trail for the Skate Trail. When I go up there alone, I carry the Silent Sports map with me on my phone. You should also be aware that neither the Boedecker Road warming hut nor the Fire Tower warming hut offers water—you must carry what you will need, plus a little extra.

Questions? If you have any other questions about the course, you can email me at mathewostrander1@gmail.com, or you can contact Chris Campbell (the Birkie Trail Manager who designed it) at trail@birkie.com. I'll see you in September!

About the Author

Matt Ostrander is a local trail runner (ultrarunner!). In 2013 alone he placed 22nd overall in the Birkie marathon in addition to being 1st in his age-class. This guy knows how to run! High school cross country coach and English teacher, and all-around-great-guy, Ostrander took off on the Birkie Trail to give everyone a detailed description of the all-new Birkie Trail Run marathon and marathon relay course. He also has some expert advice on those Birkie hills, overall training strategy, and race-day prep. The article above is 1 of his 3 articles for the 2014 Birkie Trail Run on Sept. 27. Check [birkie.com](http://www.birkie.com/run/events/birkie-trail-run) for his complete series as it is posted - <http://www.birkie.com/run/events/birkie-trail-run>.