

Fitness Level 4: Practitioners.

Transformation. Each of the following fitness groups is in the process of transforming from one fundamental way of being to another. Inner transformation occurs at the level of one's personality: the person we declare ourselves to be, thereby obtaining the results we desire.

- **Transitioner.** Non-athlete to novice athlete.
- **Launcher.** Novice athlete to beginner.
- **Practitioner.** Beginner to intermediate Practitioner.
- **Racer.** Practitioner to advanced Racer.
- **Master.** Racer to master runner.

Practitioners are developing a regular fitness regimen. But more than that, they are becoming full-fledged intermediate athletes. This will be an arduous road to follow—lots of focused practice. A minimum of three workouts a week, each requiring the following.

- **A commitment** to the discipline of regular training: workouts in scheduled time slots, with rational and non-injurious ability-building exertion structures.
- **A determined focus** during workouts to practice running skills, from the rudimentary to the advanced, until they become habitual (see 8 skills below).
- **A commitment** to recognizing, reducing, and ultimately eliminating pain during the fitness training and racing processes. The new mantra is no pain brings gain.
- **The realization** that training can be shared in a support group that shows up regularly and enjoys the fitness training process in one another's company.

Practitioners are also developing the skills needed to build a physical fitness base in four areas: adequate strength, pain-free flexibility, healthy body-mass index, and stamina—the ability to sustain prolonged physical or mental effort, without undue fatigue, by training long-and-slow.

- **The base** can consist of a variety of fitness exercise activities, including weight lifting, stretching, core strengthening, and long-slow distance activities on road, trail, or water.
- **Even ancillary activities** such as washing clothes, setting up one's dressing room, or preparing meals can be subsumed within the Practitioners fitness lifestyle regimen.
- **All exercise activities** must be sustainable: workouts are comfortable, without sharp pains, burning fatigue, or audible breathing. Enjoyment is the indispensable factor.
- **Resistance activities** (hills, weights, core) should remain relaxed throughout—gentle, held-back, *relaxed*, pressed, forced, strained—never rising above the pressing level.

Knowing how to make these distinctions along with an abiding willingness to practice the following skills is the primary program prerequisite. The object of constant repetition is to form lasting habits, which become automatic, thereby allowing the mind to focus on other things.

1. **Practitioners use** a very-slow glide to warm up, holding back severely for the first 15 minutes in spite of good energy and the urge to go faster because the pace feels good.
2. **Practitioners adjust exertion** and workout duration to build three abilities (by the rules): stamina (slow and comfortable); power (relaxed); and tempo (short enough for comfort).
3. **Practitioners adjust** their posture to apply the strongest muscles to an exercise activity. Postural adjustments begin with the feet and hips, but extend to the entire body.
4. **Practitioners use the program protocol** to prevent serious injury. They rehabilitate injuries by training *under* pain (tender), instead of *through* it (twinge, ache, sore, severe).

Perhaps the most important skill is getting into the flow of exercise. Turning off one's conscious mind and attending to the physical sensations your body gives you, as well as the emotions, attitudes, and feelings (positive and negative) that affect your exercise experience.

5. **Practitioners know how** and when to adjust their route to shorten workout duration in order to accommodate low energy, early fatigue, or a long-term preference.
6. **Practitioners adjust their footfall** for the smoothest possible landing. They scan the ground constantly, on the lookout for impediments—quirks in the route they've chosen.
7. **Practitioners use a group** to provide scheduling discipline for their fitness regimen. They share organizing duties, while building lasting friendships in a supportive group context.
8. **Practitioners use** low-key fun-run races and test-efforts to motivate regular training and to measure adaptive progress during and between training programs.