

Relay Walking: Training

This is the third part of a four-part series on long distance walk relays.

Whether you are a veteran relay walker or have never competed in a relay walk now is the time to begin the planning process. Decide on a relay then determine when registration begins. Are you putting together a team or seeking one needing members? With the target in sight, let the training begin.

How to Select a Relay Event

What are your goals?

A relay event can be a short-term goal for a long-term goal such as a marathon or triathlon. Perhaps, it may be a long-term goal related to general health or fitness.

Making a commitment to participate is a motivator to be active. Maybe your goal is simply to get moving.

What do you enjoy doing?

Browsing the Internet one can find run, walk, bike, and swim relays nationwide.

Once you decide on the activity, narrow the search further by determining how many miles is the relay, how many team members, and how long is each leg. For walking relays, locally, you can choose

among the Willamette Valley Relay (WRV), Rainier to Pacific, or Portland to Coast Relay. As founder of WRV, I am partial to this event. It is the longest walk-only relay in the world developed exclusively for walkers of all levels.

What is your fitness level?

Evaluate your fitness level when choosing distances and team goals. Be realistic about the amount of time you and your teammates are willing to (or can) commit to a training program.

The Next Planning Step: Training

The best way to ensure a fun time is to be prepared by properly training for the event. Amazingly, the best way to get fit for walking is by walking. Many a runner will tell you they use different muscles when jumping into a walk without training to walk. There

are three goals for relay training:

1. To add fitness and be able to participate and finish feeling good and uninjured (having fun);
2. To be able to walk quickly without breaking the rules of walking ;
3. To be able to meet personal and team goals.

Whatever your fitness level, a balanced walking schedule includes warmup, cool down, flexibility, hydration, and proper nutrition. If you are inactive, begin a walking program to build a mileage base by gradually adding weekly and monthly miles. Use this time to focus on form and breathing. If you are a racewalker, you'll also want to focus on technique. Vary mileage, intensity, and terrain. Your base building will enable you to walk 1+ hours continuously. Remember to include recovery days which are as important as walking days. Keep in mind to avoid the toos. Walking too far, too soon, or too fast can lead to injuries.

Once your mileage base is accomplished, focus training on endurance and strength. This is the training that will ensure that you cross the finish line feeling good. Endurance means going longer distances, generally once a week. Strength training is usually in the form of hill work.

If you are a veteran walker wanting to improve your times, the same principles apply. The fall and early winter months are ideal to focus on walking form. If you are interested in racewalking, this is the time to begin technique training to be ready to work on speed by spring. Speed can mean different things to different people. For some athletes, speed means breaking records and winning times. For the general population, speed means moving faster than normal. Moving faster than normal is a realistic goal, but competing or sprinting beyond capacity can be dangerous. Again, avoid the "toos."

Summary

How far should I walk?

Distance will vary depending on the length of the relay and the individual legs, as well as the number of legs to walk. Increase the mileage and/or intensity of your workouts gradually. Dramatic increases in distance or speed can lead to injury or illness. Build to a weekly or bi-monthly long walk equal to a distance slightly greater than the total number of miles you will walk during the relay.

How often should I walk?

Some have the time and enjoy walking daily. Plan on walking a minimum of three to four days a week. Be realistic about training remembering your goals. If you do not feel

up to a workout, that is okay; take the day off. Rest is just as important as training. It may do you some good.

How fast should I walk?

Pace or speed will vary with each individual's training and goals. Keep the "hard, easy, easy, hard, easy..." routine in mind when planning walk training. A "hard" day might be increased speed but you will need a good mileage base before doing "speed" workouts. Or, it can mean going a longer distance, again not to increase distances too quickly or too much.

Why would someone want to participate in a relay?

Relay events are about team work, camaraderie, and sportsmanship, a sense of community, compromises, challenges, triumphs, and disappointments. They represent an opportunity to stretch personal limits and to be the best one can be. To participate in a well-organized walking relay is to experience starry nights, a brilliant moon, gentle breezes, sunny skies, blazing sun, dark shadows, sunrise, and sunset. It is about volunteers, neighbors, families, business and communities sharing in common beliefs and values. It is about fun and memories that last a lifetime. ■

Additional Training Tips

Variety: Do not train the same distance, same pace, or the same course every day. Warm up and cool down. Always include these in workouts. (They help prevent injury or health complications.)

Stretch following warmup and cool down: Stretching increases flexibility and maintains joint range of motion. Do not neglect this.

Specificity: Work on the elements that are specific to your goal(s) and/or event.

The relays in the Northwest last 18 to 36 hours. You may have to walk in the heat, at night, uphill and down, on gravel surfaces. You may find yourself walking further than you thought or further than ever before. The best preparation is to do these in advance — walk when it is hot, drive to the section of the course you will be walking — take a buddy or two to walk with you. Experience what it is like by walking at night wearing a reflective vest and using either a headlamp or flashlight. Try getting your team together (or participating with others) for long group walks during the weeks leading up to the relay. This is a great spirit / team builder as well as fitness builder.



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