
The Best Route to Big Fitness? Small Steps

Ignore the urge to post a heroic effort and focus instead on the daily grind of steady improvement



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Here's the thing no one tells you about the saying "go big or go home": Most people who go big swiftly end up at home. "Massive training sessions might provide an emotional hook for an athlete to hang onto and perhaps even build some acute confidence in the moment," says Matt Dixon, founder and head coach at [Purplepatch Fitness](#) and author of [Fast-Track Triathlete](#). "But in the long-term, heroic efforts don't work."

The best way to achieve big results—in sport and other areas of life—is with small and incremental gains over a long period of time.

Habits build upon themselves, according to [B.J. Fogg](#), a researcher who studies human behavior at Stanford University, and someone I've heard present on this topic. If you want to make any kind of significant change, you'd be wise to take baby steps. In Fogg's [behavior model](#), whether someone takes action depends on both their motivation and their ability to complete a given task. If you regularly overshoot on the ability side of the equation, you're liable to flame out. But if you gradually increase the challenge over time, what was hard last week will seem easier today. I've heard Fogg say that it's the best way to create lasting progress. And it's a rule that applies to fitness, too.



“Consistency is key,” says Dixon. “The surest way to real confidence and enduring performance is to progressively layer training—slowly building on what you did in the past, adding layers over time.”

Dixon is not alone in his approach; it parallels that of the best distance runners on the planet, including Eliud Kipchoge, who won the Berlin Marathon in September and was the star of [Nike’s Breaking2 marathon exhibition](#). (Kipchoge was just 25 seconds away from becoming the first human to run a marathon in under two hours.) Patrick Sang, who coaches Kipchoge and a stable of other elite Kenyan runners, [told Wired](#) that their strategy is simple: “Slowly by slowly...Every session is a building block.”

If the science is compelling and if an incremental approach is good enough for the top athletes in the world, then why do so many people still fall prey to a suboptimal cycle of big, in-over-your-head workouts followed by extended time off due to injury and fatigue? Dixon believes there are two primary reasons: a lack of self-confidence, and a lack of understanding the training process.

“Athletes feel the need to go search for confidence, and they do this by absolutely crushing themselves—but it takes so much time to recover from these sessions, or, even worse, they get injured,” says Dixon. “But when an athlete believes in overall progression, they don’t need to seek validation in mega-workouts. Instead, they execute day-in, day-out for weeks, months, and even years.”

Unfortunately, social media intensifies the urge to shortcut a consistent approach. It’s never been easier to seek and receive external validation for your workout, and it’s never been easier to compare your workout to those of others. On Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook, it seems everyone is keen to post their latest and greatest big training day. But as I’ve [written before](#), this is the equivalent to a 21st-century fitness rat race—and it’s one that all too often [leaves athletes anxious, injured, and downright burnt out](#).

Even so, we’re only human, which means impatience is an undeniable part of our underlying condition. So don’t be surprised if at some point or another you find yourself tempted to veer off the path of consistency. When this occurs, [Jonathan Marcus](#), head coach of the elite running group [High Performance West](#) in Portland, Oregon, recommends pausing to think like a gardener: “Plants in a garden fully bloom when regularly nourished with sunlight and water. Any of our chosen endeavors, including athletic pursuits, flourish when nourished daily by concentration and positive action,” he says. “Investing too much in heroic training efforts is like watering your garden for an entire day to excess, and then starving the vegetation of any fluid for the following ten days.”

I asked Marcus how he came up with this analogy. “Consistency,” he explained, “is nature’s rule, not mine.”

Brad Stulberg (@Bstulberg) writes Outside’s Science of Performance column and is author of the new book [Peak Performance: Elevate Your Game, Avoid Burnout, and Thrive with the New Science of Success](#).

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