

The Training Philosophy Behind the Plans

Why the catalogue is built around RPE, periodized load, and a polarized bias in intensity distribution

This paper explains the logic behind the current We Run Ultras training-plan catalogue. The short version is simple: we want the training to be specific enough to improve performance, flexible enough to survive real life, and calm enough that runners can absorb the work instead of constantly recovering from it. The research language for that is perceived exertion, periodization, and intensity distribution.¹⁻⁵

Working summary. In our plans, **RPE** is the day-to-day steering wheel, **periodization** is the structure that organizes stress over weeks, and a **polarized or pyramidal bias** keeps most running easy while reserving a smaller amount of training for threshold, race-support, and sharpening work. The result should feel purposeful without feeling frantic.

Why RPE leads the plans

Pace is useful on race day, but it is not always the best anchor in training. Hills, wind, heat, poor sleep, travel, and accumulated fatigue can all make a perfectly sensible session look “slow” on a watch. Borg’s work on perceived exertion helped establish that subjective effort is not vague guesswork; it is a practical way of describing internal strain.¹ Foster and colleagues later showed that session RPE is also a usable way to quantify training load across different kinds of exercise.²

That matters because our plans are written for normal weeks, not laboratory conditions. A session that says “RPE 6” still makes sense on a rolling route, on tired legs, or in bad weather. A pace target often does not. This is why the **Starter 5K** uses cues like “5 x 2 min steady” at RPE 5 early in the block and why the **Builder 10K** frames threshold work as “strong but repeatable” rather than asking every runner to hit identical splits. The goal is to keep the physiological intent of the session intact even when the external conditions change.

RPE also helps keep the easy running honest. In the catalogue, easy days are usually written around RPE 3 to 4 and harder work usually sits around RPE 5 to 7. That is deliberate. If easy days drift upward too often, the week stops behaving as designed.

Why the plans are periodized

Periodization is just organized change over time. Instead of repeating the same week forever, you build, absorb, sharpen, and taper according to the demands of the event and the readiness of the runner. Reviews of well-trained and elite distance runners show that successful endurance training is typically periodized through changes in volume, intensity distribution, and event specificity across the training cycle.³

In practical terms, periodization is the reason our plans use recurring weekly rhythms, deliberate cutback weeks, and race-specific progression rather than a pile of disconnected workouts. The **Builder 10K** progresses long aerobic running from 60 to 95 minutes and places cutbacks after meaningful loading blocks. The **Advanced Half Marathon** keeps a stable week shape, but the Sunday long run gradually becomes more specific through steady finishes and race-support segments. The **Builder Marathon** extends the same logic over a longer runway, moving long runs from 90 minutes toward 170 minutes while protecting the week with rest and mobility days that are treated as part of the plan, not empty space.

This matters because fitness does not improve when stress is merely applied. It improves when stress is applied, absorbed, and timed well. A calm cutback week is not lost training. It is often the week that lets the previous work become useful.

Why we keep a polarized bias

The endurance literature repeatedly shows that strong programs are rarely built from medium-hard work every day. Seiler and Kjerland’s analysis of elite endurance athletes helped popularize the idea that most training tends to happen at low intensity, with a much smaller share done at moderate and high intensity.⁴ Stöggl and Sperlich later reported that, across a nine-week intervention in well-trained endurance athletes, the polarized group improved key performance markers more than threshold-heavy, high-volume, or high-intensity-only models.⁵

For recreational runners, this does not mean forcing a rigid laboratory ratio onto every single week. It means preserving the principle that most minutes should be easy enough to support adaptation, while a limited number of sessions carry the specific stress. In our catalogue that usually looks like one or two purposeful sessions surrounded by easy support running, rest, or a calmer long run.

You can see that clearly in the current plans. The **Starter 5K** keeps one primary support day and one steadier

race-support day, while the Saturday run can stay short or even optional if recovery needs protecting. The **Advanced Half Marathon** uses a sharper Tuesday, a sustained half-marathon-support Thursday, and easy support around them so the quality days remain quality days. The **Builder Marathon** places threshold-like work and marathon-support work into the same week, but most of the total time still sits in easy to steady running so the block remains repeatable.

How the research turns into an actual We Run Ultras plan

The catalogue is not trying to look scientific; it is trying to apply good science in a way runners will actually follow.

- **RPE replaces false precision.** We would rather protect the purpose of a session than pretend one pace target fits every weather forecast, route profile, and fatigue state.
- **Periodization protects momentum.** The weekly rhythm stays recognizable, but the load changes over the block so the runner grows into the race rather than living at race stress all the time.
- **Polarization protects recovery.** Easy days are not filler. They are what allow threshold, race-support, and long-run progression to work.
- **Specificity grows gradually.** The marathon plans become more marathon-like, the half-marathon plans become more rhythmical and durable, and the 5K/10K plans become sharper, but only after enough aerobic support is already in place.

That is also why the plans often feel calmer on the page than many generic internet schedules. The objective is not to make each week look impressive in isolation. The objective is to let eight, ten, twelve, or sixteen weeks add up to a runner who reaches the start line healthy, familiar with the event, and able to execute.

How to use these plans well

The philosophy only works if the runner respects it. Keep easy days easy. Treat optional support running as optional when recovery says so. Do not turn an RPE 6 session into an RPE 8 session just because the watch says you are a few seconds slower than expected. Trust cutback weeks. Let tapering reduce fatigue instead of using it as a final exam.

That is the real promise of this approach. It is not magic, and it is not anti-performance. It is simply a steadier way to build performance. When RPE guides the day, periodization guides the block, and the intensity distribution stays sensible, the training becomes much easier to repeat. Repetition is what gives the plan its value.

References

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