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Prior to last weekend, Kara Goucher had run three half marathons. Her times in those three races were 1:06:57, 1:08:30, and 1:08:05. On Sunday Kara ran her fourth half marathon, P.F. Chang's Rock 'n' Roll Arizona Half Marathon, finishing in 1:14:02.

Sounds like a bad race. But maybe not. If the only legitimate purpose of racing is to perform at the highest level one is capable of, then yes, Kara's six-minute drop-off from her usual half-marathon time was a bad race. However, if there are other legitimate purposes of racing, such as accelerating progress toward peak fitness and toward better performances in future races, then Kara likely got exactly what she wanted and needed out of her fourth half marathon.

I believe that races done relatively early in a training cycle, when one is still relatively far from peak fitness (as Kara was on Sunday), are potentially very beneficial. The main reason is that we can push ourselves harder in races than we can in any workout, and performance in peak races—those races where you truly want to be ready to perform at the highest level you're capable of—is largely a function of how hard you've pushed yourself in the process leading up to those most important events.

Here's how it works. Performance is mediated by psychology, and specifically by tolerance for suffering. On a purely physical level, all of us could go faster than we do in every race. But the pain of extreme exertion prevents us from ever reaching our true physical limits. We get closer to our true limits in some races than we do in others, though. In other words, we allow ourselves to suffer more in some races than we do in others. The amount of suffering we are able to bear in any given race is determined largely by our motivation level (how much suffering our goal for the race seems worth to us) and by our cumulative and recent experience of past suffering in races (there is a proven tolerance-boosting effect of past suffering experience).

We are able to push harder and perform at a higher level in races than in workouts because we are more motivated for them—because they are more meaningful to us. A big factor here is the competition effect. A 1968 study at Cal Berkeley found that male college students were able to pedal 20 percent longer in a high-intensity stationary bike ride to exhaustion when they were placed in the presence of another male college student of roughly equal fitness than they were when told to pedal as long as they possibly could alone. That is a huge, nonphysical, purely psychological difference, and it explains why we push harder and go faster in races than in workouts.

When you run a race, you not only work harder, suffer more, and perform better than you do in workouts. In addition, that very race effort also increases your capacity to suffer in future races. When any runner goes without racing for a relatively long period of time, as Kara did over the past year, her tolerance for suffering inevitably slips a bit. Doing an early tune-up race in the training cycle is a good way to restore one's former tolerance for the pain of extreme effort. It doesn't matter that the body is not yet fit enough to produce a spectacular time. Running that early tune-up race will increase performance in subsequent races by boosting the capacity to dig deep.

In my experience, the effect is almost immediate. My very next high-intensity workout after a tune-up race is often done at a whole different level than my last high-intensity run before the tune-up race. Sure, you have to swallow your pride a bit to race when you're not in great shape, but the dividend comes quickly. And Kara—who showed no disappointment whatsoever after her race Sunday—clearly understands this.

"Now I have a starting point," she said. "Hopefully, next time I run a half marathon I'll run about seven minutes faster!"

I have no doubt she will.

About the Author:

Matt Fitzgerald is a senior editor at Competitor Group, with regular contributions to *competitor.com*, *Triathlete*, *Inside Triathlon* and *Competitor*. Matt has written 17 books, and counting, including *Brain Training For Runners* and *Racing Weight*.

Check out Matt's latest book, [Racing Weight Quick Start Guide: A 4-Week Weight-Loss Plan for Endurance Athletes](#).