

What on earth is Fartlek training?

What does the word Fartlek mean, what actually is Fartlek training, and when and where should Fartlek training be used in the runner's training programme? These are some of the many questions that are always asked regarding this particular method of training.

The word Fartlek is a Swedish word, which means, 'speed play'. It was first used on the pine needle paths of the Swedish forests by Gosta Holmer, coach to world record holders Gunder Haag and Arne Anderson.

Fartlek training means you run as you please and play around with the speed element of the training session.

You may set a time limit of, for example, 50 minutes for your Fartlek session and, during that time, cover all the training pathways and energy systems utilised by endurance runners ie fast, slow, sprinting and endurance. To achieve this, you should run over undulating ground either in a park, wood, golf course on the roads or over the hills.

During your run you could sprint 50m up hills, run hard over a thousand metres of 'repetitions', stride down hills or do short sprints, all interspersed with steady running, jogging, or even walking. Although the objective is to run fast when you feel like it, Fartlek is not an easy form of training. The intensity and effectiveness of the sessions is down to the athlete's own strength of mind. The ability to work hard is key because in this unstructured training environment, it is easier to miss a repetition or walk or jog.

Coaches have tended to move away slightly from the real essence of the Fartlek-type session and make it more structured. In this way, it cannot only be employed over the terrain previously mentioned but on roads, over playing fields and even on the track.

Coaches will often have a pre-determined set time for the session, such as a 50-minute Fartlek, which will contain 15 speed efforts. The longest is over 1200m, the shortest over 60m, with the rest of the efforts in between these parameters, with a jog recovery following each effort.

On a road Fartlek, the coach may say that the efforts should take place between a set of lamp posts with the next set a jogged recovery, building up each repetition to say 10 lamp posts with six lamp posts jog recovery.

In these structured sessions, the athlete knows the set time of the Fartlek, the number of efforts, the range of efforts, and the recovery after each effort. However, certain coaches in a park, on the track, and over playing fields, will only inform the athlete of the length of the Fartlek session which, for example, may be for 45 minutes.

The rest of the session, the number of repetitions, the duration of each repetition and the recovery after each repetition are then controlled by the coach using a whistle.

In this way, the athlete does not know what is coming next, how long they will have to run hard for, and how long they have to recover. It brings a more structured and disciplined approach to the Fartlek session.

Using this system, all the energy pathways are involved, making it very similar to the race situation, as well as involving other important training ingredients. The short sprints with long recovery involve the pure sprint system.

The longer repetitions, which are run quickly with a short recovery, involve the lactate system (burning legs syndrome). The consistent steady running, strides, and recovery stages, involve the oxygen system (you can talk during these sections).

Other aspects of training and racing that are involved can include technique work on the hills and short sprints; strength-endurance work because of the short recoveries; power can be developed with

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explosive running up short, sharp hills; pace judgement is also involved in how to control and manage the different changes of tempo within the session.

Fartlek training can be used at any time of year, with mixed-ability groups and with athletes of all ages. However, it must be progressive throughout the season, which means increasing the length of the session and number of repetitions that are run within it. It should also be progressive throughout the athlete's career.

The younger athlete should start with the whistle-controlled Fartlek, progressing to the structured

Fartlek as they get older so that they can be left to do it alone. The pure Fartlek session is best suited to the more experienced runner who has the self-discipline to ensure that they get the best out of each session.

Remember, Fartlek is an added variety to training to improve all the energy pathways and ingredients mentioned above – it is not an easy option.

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