Dear Diary…

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Runners and racewalkers trying to improve their times often head to bookstores, magazine racks and the internet looking for The Big Secret—that perfect training schedule that's going to make them 30 seconds, or a minute, or five minutes faster in their next 5K. And that information is definitely valuable. But having great training information and a training schedule is only half the battle. Everybody has different genes, different job and family situations, and different lifestyles; so everybody responds a little bit differently to their training. Consequently, two people following the same training program can end up with very different results.

The only way to learn what works best for you is to keep close track of your workouts. And that means keeping a training log or diary.

A training log helps to keep you motivated, and it allows you to learn from your own successes and failures. When you have a good race, you can look back and see what you did right; if you have a less than stellar performance, you can find out what may have gone wrong.

You don't need an expensive log book to record your workouts. All you need is a simple notebook or calendar. But whatever you use, it should have enough room to include the following:

Morning Heart Rate As you get fitter your stronger heart will be able to pump more blood with each beat. So your heart rate will be lower both at rest and at any given training or racing pace. Recording your heart rate every morning will help you to track your improving fitness. Heart rate can also be used as a very good gauge of overtraining. If your morning heart rate is more than 5 beats higher than normal you're probably fatigued and/or dehydrated and you should probably take a very easy or off day.

Hours/Quality of Sleep Changes in sleep patterns provide another early indicator of overtraining. Record the time you go to bed, the number of hours you sleep and the quality of that sleep. If you have trouble falling asleep, or wake up frequently during the night, you may be overtrained.

Body Weight Body weight can be used as an indicator of both overtraining, and hydration state. Your morning body weight gives you a good baseline value. If weight loss is a goal, weighing yourself in the morning instead of later in the day will minimize fluctuations caused by eating and drinking during the day. If you aren't trying to lose weight, sudden weight loss can indicate overtraining. Your weight after the workout can be used to show you how much water weight you've lost due to dehydration. (One quart of water weighs about 3 ½ pounds.)

Diet You are what you eat. (I'm a 155 pound box of Cap'n Crunch.) Your diet can profoundly affect your performance. Not enough carbohydratyes and you won't have enough energy to get through your long workouts. Too much simple sugar and you can get fatigued from an insulin induced "bonk."

Weather The weather can influence the quality of your training more than any other factor. If it's hot or humid your heart rate is going to be much higher at any given pace. With a higher heart rate you aren't going to be able to walk as fast as you could on a cooler day. If possible, record the temperature and humidity at the beginning and end of your workout. The weather channel or an internet weather site can provide these values, or you can purchase a portable sling psychrometer for about $30 to take your own readings.

Scheduled Workout Your training log is a great place to write down your training schedule. That way when

you look back over your workouts you'll be able to compare what you did to what you intended to do.

Actual Workout Obviously most of what you write down in your log will be your workout: the walk itself, including mile or kilometer splits and heart rates if you have a heart rate monitor, as well as details about your warm up and cool down.

Perceptions In addition to the nuts-and-bolts details of the workout, you should also write down how it felt. It's okay to feel less than 100% from time to time, but if you feel like garbage for days or weeks at a time there's a problem—and more work probably isn't the answer.

Shoes Worn It's not a bad idea to write down which shoes you wear for your workouts. That way you'll be able to keep track of how many miles you put on them—anything over 500 and it's time to think about retiring them. You'll also be able to determine that a particular shoe may not be for you. If, for example, your knee hurts every time you wear your Nikes, but not your New Balances, it's probably a good idea to relegate the Swooshies to lawn mowing duty.

Cross-Training Finally, be sure to include information on your non-walking workouts. Swimming, weight-training, stretching, and other cross-training exercises are great for you, but they will have an impact on your walking. Keep close track on whether your supplemental activites are truly helping you, or just adding to your fatigue level.

Remember, those who don't know their history are destined to repeat it. And that's good enough if you're at the top of your game; but if you're anywhere else, your training log can be as useful as a roadmap to get you to where you want to be.

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