

Train like a Mexican by Julian Hopkins (Former National Event Coach)

I would like to give you some insight into how the Mexican walkers have trained to become world champions, Although they have a completely different system and outlook from ourselves I think that their training is worth looking at in some detail for several reasons. Firstly, it has been difficult in recent years to obtain information on how the worlds best have been training, for Russian methods are not usually disclosed. Secondly, I think one can always learn something of interest from the training of other people - especially when they are as successful as the Mexicans!

The first important point is that the Mexican "training year" is divided into two equal parts. The first is designed to produce a racing peak in May and June (for their European tour) and the second around the major games later in the year

FIRST PERIOD: This occupies most of December and January. The aim of this period is to develop general endurance - i.e. the ability to maintain a prolonged effort of moderate intensity - the following methods are used :

(a) Sessions of ordinary walking (with arms lowered) for 3-4 hours in the woods at an altitude of 3,000 metres (about 10,000 ft). The pace is slow on the level and downhill but fast uphill.

(b) Race walking for 2-3 hours (up to 4 hours after the third week) at a speed of 5.45 and 6.00 per kilometre.

(c) Walking at medium to hard effort up and down extinct volcanoes (situated about one hours drive from Mexico City) reaching an altitude of 5,000 metres (over 16,000 ft), This training includes crossing snowfields and is done in heavy boots.

(d) About 20 minutes of gymnastics each day including apparatus work, medicine ball and isometric exercises.

(e) Various games are played including volleyball, basketball and walking football (you can only run when challenging or being challenged for the ball!). The latter is the most popular.

(f) Other forms of general endurance training are sometimes used e.g. - cycling, cross-country, skiing and swimming.

SECOND PERIOD: This 50 days period occupies most of February and March. The aim is to introduce specific endurance training i.e. to improve the ability to hold an effort of fixed high intensity for a prolonged period. The main training method consists of continuous walking alternating long / slower sessions with shorter/faster and medium pace sessions. Now the sessions are calculated in kilometres rather than for a particular duration. About 70% of the training is dedicated to specific endurance sessions. These consist of morning sessions of between 20 and 40 kms at 5.15 to 5.30 per kilometre (the most popular distance is 30 kms which is usually covered 3-4 times per week). In the afternoon, 6-8 kms of faster walking is carried out usually 3-4 times per week. Mountain sessions or fartlek training is not usually included in this period. Of the remaining training, 10% is dedicated to maintaining general endurance, 10% to developing specific and general strength and 10% to flexibility work.

THIRD PERIOD: This occupies another 50 days in April and May and is used for a higher development of specific endurance — this time by the repetition method. The training is divided up as follows :

(a) Repetition method (50%)

(b) Continuous specific endurance (20%)

(c) Improving basic speed (15%)

(d) Flexibility work (10%)

(e) Maintaining general endurance (15%) Repetition training is carried out on the track 3-4 times per week. The first session consists of long efforts (2-4 kms), the second of

medium efforts (800 metres - 2 kms) and the third of short efforts (100—800 metres). The speed is 4.30 improving to 4.20 per kilometre except for every fourth repetition of short efforts which is faster. Recoveries are partial except after the faster short repetitions when complete recovery is taken. Here are several examples :
First week of the period 1- Monday - 4x4 kms (5.00 recovery) Wednesday - 8x2 kms (3.00 recovery) Friday — 4 sets of 4x800 metres (1.30 recovery)
Last week of the period : Monday - 8x2 kms (3.00 recovery) Wednesday - 16x1 km (2.00 recovery) Friday - 8 sets of 4x400 metres (1:30 recovery). In this training the volume and intensity is adjusted to suit the individual. The best 20 kms walkers cover about 16 kms in repetitions whilst the top 50 kms men total 24 kms per session. The continuous special endurance consists of 2-3 sessions of 15—20 kms covered at 5.00 per kilometre whilst a session of fartlek is included for variety.

FOURTH PERIOD: This only lasts 20 days and covers the end of May and the beginning of June. The emphasis is on polishing up basic speed for the main races at this issue. Three or four times per week repetitions are done on the track over various distances up to one kilometre. Speeds are about 4.10-4.15 per kilometre, 2.25 - 2.30 for 600 metres and 1.35— 1.40 per 400 metres, Every fourth repetition is done somewhat faster but the times do not go below 4.00 for one kilometre or 1.30 for 400 metres. There is full recovery between repetitions. Speed sessions are usually carried out in hot weather because this assists rapid muscular contractions. Each week there are also 2-3 sessions of 15-20 kms covered at 5.00 per kilometre. Almost everyday technique drills and swimming (to promote active recovery) are included.

At the start of the competitive season, the Mexicans use races for self-evaluation. These give them an accurate assessment of their abilities and enable them to plan their racing strategy for major events. During the period of major competition, the training load is considerably reduced. The summary, one can readily appreciate the logic of the Mexican system which fits in with the well tried scheme of (1) developing a broad base of general endurance (2) developing specific endurance (3) developing specific endurance at higher intensity (4) developing basic speed

Clearly with such well—considered training plans plus the advantages of altitude and a well financed squad system, the future success of Mexican walking seems assured but there is no easy road to the top for these walkers over 8000 - 10,000 kms per year - at high altitude!