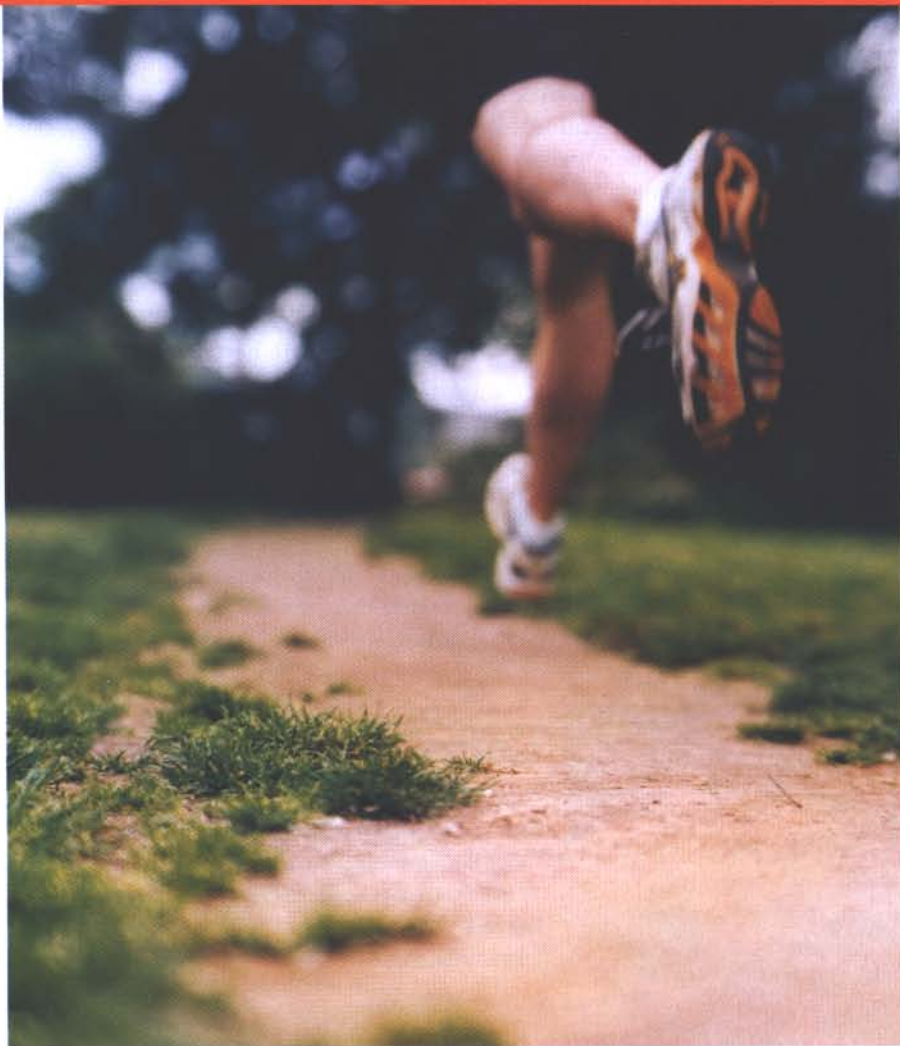


HOW DO YOU KNOW IF YOU'RE RUNNING AT THE RIGHT INTENSITY? START TALKING BY JOHN HANC

Speak Easy



OKAY, CLASS, ARE YOU READY? Please warm up for five minutes, and then, while running, recite the Pledge of Allegiance. The whole thing. Once done, answer this question: Were you able to recite those words with relative ease? Or did it sound more like, “with...*huff*...liberty...*puff*...and justice...*cough*... for all...*gasp*?”

This was a test. No, not of memory, but of intensity. The so-called “talk test” is one of the most widely used, not to mention most convenient, methods of determining whether a person is exercising too hard. The idea is that if you can still carry on a conversation while training, then you’re not overly taxing your cardiovascular system. Running above this intensity level pushes you out of your aerobic-conditioning zone (the aerobic exercise level that produces maximum training effects), and it becomes hard to sustain exercise for any length of time.

The talk test is easy to administer, cheap, and simple—too simple, say some. Those who discount its usefulness argue that other modes of gauging intensity—such as heart-rate monitors and VO₂ max tests (where a lab technician monitors your respiration via a tube you breathe through)—are far more precise.

A new study, however, confirms the value and the accuracy of the ol’ vocal cords. As part of a long-term project done on the talk test, researchers at the University of Wisconsin–La Crosse had subjects recite aloud the Pledge of Allegiance while running on treadmills. The pledge was selected because it was familiar and it contained 31 words—enough to assess whether a person can actually converse. Researchers also measured the subjects’ heart and breathing rates. The results showed that the talk test was an accurate predictor of intensity. Those subjects who were able to comfortably re-

CONVERSATIONAL PACE Speedwork is important, but most of your running should feel comfortable.

cite the pledge also had heart and breathing rates that were within their target aerobic zones. The converse was also true: Those who were huffing and puffing their way through the recitation were generally running too hard.

In another major study last year, Paddy Ekkekakis, Ph.D., and his colleagues at Iowa State University wanted to see if they could help people understand what optimal exercise intensity feels like, so that exercisers could adjust their efforts accordingly. The researchers had two groups of 30 college students report their perceived levels of effort while running at various speeds.

The result? “The most appropriate level of exercise is the intensity that does