

How to Improve Your Next 5K

by Jason Leydon, Head Coach, CrossFit Milford



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Why the 5K Matters

At CrossFit Milford, we train for real life – and the 5K is one of the best “real life” tests there is. It’s long enough to challenge your engine, short enough to be approachable, and clear enough that you can measure progress without overcomplicating the process. For most CFM athletes, the goal isn’t to become a full-time runner. The goal is to build an aerobic base that carries over into everything you do: workouts in the gym, playing with your kids, weekend hikes, and simply feeling capable in your day-to-day life.

A better 5K shows up as better fitness across the board. You recover faster between hard efforts, you feel less crushed by longer workouts, and you gain confidence because you’re improving something that used to feel like a limiter. If you’ve ever said, “I’m just not a runner,” that’s exactly why you should train for one. Running isn’t a talent – it’s a capacity. And like anything else we do, it gets better when we apply the right stimulus, consistently, over time.

What Goes Into Better Running

Most people think getting faster in a 5K is about pushing harder. But real improvement comes from understanding what makes running work in the first place. Running performance is a combination of efficiency, aerobic capacity, and your ability to tolerate discomfort at race pace – and each of these pieces can be trained.

First, there's efficiency, which is how well you move when you run. Efficiency isn't about having perfect form. It's about wasting less energy. The more relaxed and stable you are, the cheaper every step becomes. Over thousands of steps, this matters a lot. Think about running tall with a stable midline, relaxed shoulders, and quick light steps instead of heavy stomping or overstriding. Efficiency means your body is doing the same amount of work with less cost.



Second, running is controlled by aerobic capacity. This is your ability to produce energy for a long time without fatigue stacking up too quickly. In a 5K, aerobic capacity is the foundation. If that base is weak, you feel good early but fall apart halfway through. If that base is strong, you can stay controlled, keep your pace steady, and still have something left late.

Third, you need threshold ability, which is your capacity to run hard without tipping into a full blow-up. This is the difference between “I’m uncomfortable but in control” and “I’m hanging on for dear life.” When you raise threshold, you raise the pace you can hold without falling apart. That’s huge in a race like the 5K.

The Energy Systems Behind a Faster 5K

To improve your 5K, you don’t need to memorize physiology, but you do need to understand what system you’re training and why. A 5K for most CFM athletes takes somewhere between 15 and 40 minutes. That means your energy comes mostly from the aerobic system, supported by threshold work and a smaller contribution from speed.

The aerobic system is the primary driver. It uses oxygen to create energy and powers the majority of the race. Even if you don't feel like you're jogging easy during a 5K, your aerobic system is still doing most of the work. The aerobic system improves when you accumulate time at lower intensity. Easy runs matter because they teach your body to deliver oxygen efficiently, use fat as fuel longer, and recover faster between efforts. The better your aerobic base is, the less "expensive" running feels – meaning your race pace takes less effort.

The threshold (or glycolytic) system is what takes over when pace rises. This is the middle gear. In a 5K, you live here for a big stretch of the race. It's uncomfortable but controlled, and training it teaches your body to clear and reuse energy byproducts instead of drowning in them. When threshold improves, your "cruising speed" goes up. Translation: you can run faster without feeling like you're going to explode.

The **ATP-PC/speed system** is the smallest contributor, but it has an important role. This system covers short bursts such as your start, hill surges, and the final kick. It doesn't dominate the race, but it decides the end of the race. Training speed in small doses improves your turnover, running economy, and your confidence to change gears when it counts.

If the aerobic system is your foundation, threshold is your ceiling for sustainable speed, and ATP-PC is your finishing weapon.

How to Program Running 2-3 Days per Week

Most CFM athletes aren't running five days a week, and they don't need to. Because you're also doing mixed-modal training, the key is to hit the minimum effective dose of running that moves your 5K forward without stealing recovery from the rest of your training. Two to three runs per week is the sweet spot.

If you run **twice per week**, each session needs a clear role. One session should be a **harder quality day** (intervals or speed work) because that's what improves race pace. The second session rotates between an **easy aerobic build** and a **tempo/threshold effort**, depending on the week. This approach gives you both engine work and race-specific development without requiring high frequency.

If you run **three times per week**, your structure becomes very clean. You get one **interval day**, one **easy aerobic day**, and one **tempo/threshold day**. Think of it like this: intervals teach you to run goal pace, tempo teaches you to hold hard paces longer, and easy runs build the base so you can repeat that work without falling apart.

Spacing matters. You don't want your hard run days stacked back-to-back. A simple rhythm is hard → easy → hard, with at least one lower-intensity day between quality sessions.

The Three Run Sessions You Need

To keep things simple, every good 5K program includes three types of sessions.

The first is an **easy aerobic run**, and it's the one most people underestimate. It should feel conversational – the kind of run where you finish and feel better than when you started. This run is how you build durability, aerobic efficiency, and recovery. It's also how you stay consistent without getting beat up.

The second is a **tempo or threshold run**. This is controlled discomfort: hard enough that you respect it, but not so hard that you fall apart. Tempo work teaches you to “float” at a higher pace and protects you from that classic mile-two breakdown in a 5K.

The third is an **interval or speed session**, which builds the ability to run at (or slightly faster than) goal 5K pace in repeatable doses. This is where you teach your body what race pace feels like, improve turnover, and build confidence in your ability to handle that speed without panicking

You don't need more than this. You need to do these three things better over time.

Progressive Overload for Running

Progressive overload in running is the same concept we use for strength: gradually increasing stress so the body adapts. The mistake people make is progressing too aggressively. You don't get better by smashing yourself one week and limping through the next. You get better by building repeatable quality.

There are only a few ways to progress running safely. You can add **time** to your easy runs, add **reps** to your intervals, extend the **duration** of your tempo, or slightly reduce rest while holding the same pace. The key rule is to progress *one variable at a time*. If you add reps *and* increase pace *and* cut rest, you're not progressing – you're gambling.

A smart guideline is 5-10% total workload increase per week. And if your pace drops noticeably or you feel wrecked for multiple days, that's feedback that overload went too far. Long-term improvement comes from steady layering, not hero workouts.

Strength + Recovery That Support Running

Running feels better when your body is prepared for it. Even basic strength work helps, especially for busy professional athletes who sit a lot and then ask their body to sprint, climb stairs, or train hard after work.

The most transferable strength pieces for a 5K are simple: unilateral leg strength (split squats, step-ups), posterior chain work (RDLs, hinging), calves and Achilles durability (calf raises), and trunk stability. Two short sessions a week makes a real difference.

Recovery habits matter just as much. Hard runs need easy days around them. Hydration and protein help tissue repair. Sleep is the multiplier. If you want to feel better running, you don't just train running – you support your body so it can adapt to running.

8-Week Sample 5K Program (2-3 Runs/Week)

Intensity guide:

- Easy: conversational pace (RPE 3-5)
- Tempo: comfortably hard (RPE 6-7)
- Intervals: hard but repeatable (RPE 8-9)

Warm-up every run:

5-8 min easy jog → dynamic drills → 3-4 short strides if doing tempo/intervals.

Week 1

Intervals: 6 × 400m at strong controlled effort, 90 sec walk/jog rest.

This week sets the baseline for what 5K effort feels like in repeatable chunks.

Easy run: 25-30 minutes easy, keep breathing smooth.

Optional: 15-20 min easy + 6 strides.

Week 2

Intervals: 8 × 400m at the same pace, 75-90 sec rest.

Progress comes from adding reps while holding quality.

Tempo: 10-12 minutes tempo inside a 25-30 minute run.

Optional easy: 30-35 minutes easy.

Week 3

Intervals: 5 × 600m at goal 5K pace, 2 min rest.

Slightly longer repeat distance = bigger race transfer.

Easy run: 35-40 minutes easy.

Optional: 20 min easy + 6-8 strides

Week 4

Intervals: 4 × 800m at goal 5K pace, 2-3 min rest.

This is a true race-pace builder.

Tempo: 15 minutes tempo inside a 30-35 minute run.

Optional easy: 30 min easy.

Week 5

Intervals: 10 × 300m slightly faster than 5K pace, 60-75 sec rest.

This teaches speed without overwhelming fatigue.

Easy run: 40-45 minutes easy.

Optional tempo: 12-15 minutes tempo.

Week 6

Intervals: 6 × 600m at 5K pace, 2 min rest.

Back to longer repeats to solidify pace.

Tempo: 18-20 minutes tempo inside a 35-40 minute run.

Optional easy: 30-35 minutes easy.

Week 7

Intervals: 3 × 1K at goal 5K pace, 3 min rest,
then 4 × 200m fast and smooth with full recovery.

This week is about sharpening and race confidence.

Easy run: 30-35 minutes easy.

Optional: 20 min easy + 6 strides.

Week 8 (Taper + Test)

Sharpen: 5 × 400m at goal pace, full recovery.

Keep it crisp, not exhausting.

Easy run: 20-25 minutes easy + 4 strides.

Test: 5K time trial or race.

Start controlled, stay steady through the middle, and compete in the last mile.

Closing Thoughts

If you follow this plan consistently, you'll notice that running starts to feel simpler. Your breathing settles sooner, your pace stays steadier, and you stop falling apart late. That's the whole goal: building an engine that holds up under pressure. Not just for a race, but for your training and your life.

If you want help tailoring this around your schedule, strength work, or current fitness, grab a coach at CFM. We'll set your paces, adjust your week, and make sure your next 5K is something you're proud of.