Interval of Insanity
Just how crazy is it to attempt speedwork without forethought or preparation?

There is a way to instill a panic in your neighborhood without doing anything remotely illegal or obscene. I can tell you how to avoid this, though I probably don’t have to. You are a better person than I am, and as a better person, you will make the phone calls I didn’t make. You will warn your neighbors of the potentially alarming display they may witness should they happen to look out the window. You will keep your voice calm and reassuringly open with an equivalent of the following:  *Hey! Good morning! Listen, I wanted to tell you, in case you happen to see me on the road in the next half hour or so, that I have not discovered zombies in my basement, and I don’t have a mouse in my pants, and the house isn’t on fire. I’m not having a psychotic episode or manufacturing any sort of extreme imaginary horror either. I’m just running as fast as I can. It’s something called interval training. It’s supposed to be good for you.*

I imagine the people in the first house I pass one morning enjoying a peaceful breakfast at the bay window, the youngest having just asked for a refull of her juice when her father lunges to cover her eyes so she won’t see the man clobbering down the road at knock-gut speed – legs pumping, arms chopping, head jabbing, lips frozen in a happy grimace, the animals grappling beneath his clothing. A few houses down, an older couple gazes out the window at the cardinal in the feeder. In unison, they lower their coffee cups from their lips and stare blankly at the man who slobbers into view, gasping and heaving, collapsing forward, holding his knees, arching his back with a fist to his mouth. *Will he vomit?* asks the lady. *He may,* says the man.

Progress in every case is preceded by variations of the same seven words: There has to be a better way. If a respected source claimed there was a way to accomplish a difficult task more efficiently and realize a substantial benefit in as little as two weeks without the use of any banned substances and without making a pact with the devil – if this source told you all you had to do was run as fast as you can for as long as you can, at the risk of looking like a fool, wouldn’t you try it?

I had just come across an article in *The New York Times* detailing the findings of a study in the *Journal of Applied Physiology* that claimed after only two weeks of interval training, six of eight participants *doubled* their endurance. A later study in the same journal found that again, after only two weeks of intervals (10 sets of four minutes of full exertion followed by two minutes of rest, every other day) participants increased their bodys fat-burning ability during subsequent low-to moderate-intensity workouts by 36 percent. A 36 percent increase in fat-burning for the same old workout!

The mechanism by which these gains were accomplished, according to Jason L .Talanian, the lead author of the study, had to do, in part, with the ability of interval training to stimulate mitochondria, tiny cellular motors that convert fuel into energy, to burn fat first before tapping into carbohydrate stores – glad news to anyone who has been begging their body at every possible turn to *burn fat first!* Additionally, the burst of exertion required by intervals recruited new muscles that, once trained, used fuel during subsequent low- to moderate-intensity workouts, making those workouts far more fat consumptive than any previous.

That’s all I needed to hear. I pushed away from the table and went to look for my shoes. This interval thing was for *me.* I was all *“Interval,* dog, ‘cause that’s how we *burn fat first* in the Valley.”

*“I made it a little over a quarter of a mile. ‘Don’t cry,’ I thought. ‘Breathe.’ ”*

Outside the house, I stood on the quiet road with the morning breeze blowing through my shirt. I kicked my legs a few times and shook my feet from my ankles and bent my neck to either side and swung my arms. The plan, if there was on, was to just run as fast as I possibly could for as far as I could go, then walk until finding the strength and the breath to do it again, and continue like that for a total of a mile out and a mile back. My regular two-miler, done in frantic spurts.

The speed came instantly, and I fought to ride it without spinning into the ditch by focusing on the farthest point of the road while my feet and knees and hands and arms flickered in my peripheral vision. When you look strange, its probably best to just go with it and not try to fix anything in the moment. A child looks joyful when running full speed. A grown adult looks crazy. Even without the ability to see myself, I knew I looked crazy.

When the first car approached and the driver saw me barreling toward her, I tried to smile so as to diffuse the situation – something that would make a full-out sprint look casual from the neck up. But its difficult to run your fastest while smiling casually. The jostling of your face requires that you hold the smile tightly, driving the casual straight out of it and turning it to more of a Jack Nicholson, *Here’s Jonny!* Smile than anything else. And I’m a waver when I’m on the road. Not so much of a “Hi there” as a combination between “Don’t hit me with your car” and a “No need to call the ambulance.” But you can’t wave when running full speed either. You can try – and I did – but a grown man smiling and waving while running full speed in your direction is more likely to make you reach for the nearest make-shift club than to smile and wave back. The driver locked her eyes to mine and cut a wide path as she passed.

I made a little over a quarter of a mile before pulling the rip cord and letting out the chute. The tight lines of my stride dissolved into looping arcs that slowed me to a walk. *Don’t cry,* I thought. *Breathe, keep walking.* As soon as I could recite my phone number and identify the current president, I took off again. Several more rounds took me out to a mile in what felt like record time. Subsequent flights going back grew dramatically shorter, but the walk connecting the flights began to feel productive. Between bouts of nausea, I could feel all of my cellular fuel-to-energy conversions – all those mitochondria *burning the fat first, baby.* I made it back home in about the same amount of time as I would have had I done my usual trot.

The next day I could hardly move. By that evening, I could use the shower and feed myself. I ran again as soon as possible, a week and a half later – a slow, sensible run that didn’t scare the neighbors. With muscles still groaning from abuse, I was grateful just to be shuffling along at my regular pace. I knew I probably would try intervals again someday, after the pain was forgotten. A 36 percent gain, no matter where you find it, is tough to ignore. In the meantime, I’d do my runs on this road and let my body burn the fat just as soon as it got around to it, baby. The most important promise I made to myself that morning was to never read *The New York Times* until *after* I finished a run.