



**JAMES BAKER  
EXCELS IN  
OFF-ROAD  
RUNNING AND  
RACING**

# BAKER'S WINNING RECIPE

He might not be a household name, but James Baker is no ordinary club runner. Since 1998, he has won nearly 500 races – that's three wins every month for 14 years. How does he do it, and what motivates him to keep stockpiling the winner's pots?

● **Words:** David Bradford **Pics:** Sussex Sports Photography ([www.sussexsportsphotography.com](http://www.sussexsportsphotography.com))

**P**ROLIFIC: that's the word that best describes James Baker. And anyone who does a lot of winning makes a target of himself. In his home county of Sussex, Baker is a marked man, the familiar frontrunner whom we slower guys dream about beating. His prominence also means he attracts critique, as I found out within minutes of posting on Twitter that I had interviewed him for this magazine. Someone tweeting under the name of a local running club took umbrage at my description of Baker as "ever-racing, usually-winning" and sniped that not all wins are equally worthy of merit.

Critics of the 35-year-old complain that he targets and wins too many 'easy' races (i.e. fun runs and smaller events), whereas, they say, he should focus on county-standard and championship contests, challenging himself to improve. The latter charge is self-evidently unfair: Baker does step up to the plate in bigger events; in January, he competed in the Southern Cross Country Championships (finishing a respectable 31st), and today I am speaking to him just after he has run the Chichester 10K, which always attracts a classy field. Nonetheless, I put it to him that he could perhaps reach greater heights if he raced less often and targeted certain races, gearing his training specifically towards them.

"Yeah, but if I trained for two or three months just for one race, I think I'd feel too much pressure in that race and not perform as well."

It is a pragmatic and matter-of-fact response with which it is hard to find fault; some people race best when they race often.

Baker's detractors imply that he competes for the wrong reasons: for self-satisfaction and prizes, rather than honour and excellence. His Power of 10 page reveals that he competes

all over Sussex and further afield, in Hampshire and the West Country. Does he ever target races for the prize money?

"Yes, I do sometimes, if I'm honest."

There is no mealy-mouthed evasiveness, just a disarmingly honest admission, such that it's hard to conjure up an objection. If you were fast enough to win prizes, wouldn't you cast an eye over the awards list before entering races? I know I would.

"You can't earn a living from it, nowhere near," Baker points out, "I probably lose out overall on entry fees and travelling costs, or maybe break even at the end of the year."

## Early days

The indisputable fact is this runner loves racing – as frequently as he can – especially when it involves winning. It's a taste he developed many years ago.

"At primary school, I was winning cross-countries. I won one in 1984. My first ever race was around the school fields."

He never looked back, literally or metaphorically.

"At school sports day in 1992, I won the 800m and 1,500m, and ran a leg in the 4x 100m, and we won that too. And I just loved winning."

In the same year, as he enjoyed this sports-day clean sweep, Baker joined his local running club, Chichester Runners & AC, where he has remained ever since. He originally aspired to be an 800m runner, and cracked the two-minute mark, but soon accepted that he could achieve more in longer-distance events.

Although he still competes on the track, Baker's finest runs seem to come on courses that are anything but flat and fast.

"Some of the more obscure races I've won are probably where I've produced my best performances, such as the Jog Shop 20."

ENDURANCE / **JAMES BAKER**



**Eat like a winner**  
 "My girlfriend would say I have a terrible diet: I don't eat beef or pork, but chocolate, cakes – and my favourite meal is fish and chips... I could probably do with losing a couple of pounds; I'm 10st 10lbs – a bit more than I should be really!"  
**JAMES BAKER**

Indeed, his Jog Shop 20-miler record of 2hrs 03mins, set in 2010, was an astounding effort. The course is brutal, mostly off road over the South Downs, yet Baker sustained an average speed of just over 6mins per mile, smashing the previous record (held by Mark Steinle, a former 2hrs 09mins marathoner) by more than three minutes. He grins as he remembers conquering an even tougher course.

"I won the Exmoor Stagger, and I've got the course record there – 1hr 47mins I did for that. It's about 16 miles off road, up to the highest point in Somerset, Dunkery Beacon, really rocky terrain."

**Satisfaction**

I sense that breaking course records is what gives him greatest satisfaction.

"Yeah, I think I get more pleasure from that – not winning a race but attacking a course record, like in these off-road events."

No doubt Baker's critics would chime in here that dominating an obscure race is a lesser achievement than going toe-to-toe in a race stacked with equal-calibre rivals. (In cycling, there is a similar snobbishness among road racers about time-triallists.) Is battling solo against the clock less worthy than racing for position against others? For me, it's not a moral question. We participate for pleasure; each to his own.

Baker does what he enjoys: setting records and notching up wins. He demonstrates that it's possible to reach a good standard (better than most of us will ever attain) and find contentment there, without harbouring illusions of greatness or trying to climb the slippery pole to athletic stardom – like it or not, if you're aged over 20 and still paying for your own kit, you're unlikely to ever make a career of competing. Baker's day-job is not quite what his name implies, but does involve stuff you might spread on baked goods.

"I work in a factory making mayonnaise and dressings, Monday to Friday, 8am to 1pm" Afternoons are free for training, then?

"I tend to work around training, which is quite fortunate. It allows me to occasionally get out at 6:15 in the morning and do a five-mile run before work. More often, I'll train at around 1:30 or two o'clock, get out for maybe an hour or two, and then if I feel like it go out again at about half-six and do another easy five-mile run."

It's a fairly full-on training schedule, as you would expect, and Baker's weekly mileage has lately increased because he is training for the Brighton Marathon.

"I'm doing 80-100 miles per week. I've been up to 90 for the past three weeks. Last Monday, I went out and did 20 miles in 1hr 54mins."

No shying away from volume, then?  
 "I've done 48,000 miles since 1994," says Baker, producing a wodge of A4 sheets – his old-school, hard-copy training log, meticulously filled in with

blue biro. "My highest ever mileage in a week was 142." When I suggest he get this precious data digitised to keep it safe, he cheerfully admits that he doesn't even have internet access at home. Here is a man for whom high-tech amusements are subordinate to life's simplest pleasure, running.

The back-to-basics attitude extends to his training. Baker is self-coached and rarely trains on a track (Chichester doesn't have one). For speed work, he uses a measured 400m strip of tarmac on the outskirts of the town, and does most of his long runs alone ("no one can keep up") on the roads and South Downs surrounding Goodwood.

"I'm keen on fartlek training" Baker explains, "I'll run, say, nine miles with a mile or ten minutes steady, and then three minutes fast, two minutes steady. And I've been throwing in some one-minute efforts at the end of the session. So I'll do four times three minutes fast, then maybe ten minutes steady, and then four to six one-minute efforts really fast."



**Training**

It's tempting to wonder if this dedication could be more fruitfully honed within a group, especially when he recalls fondly the summer season of 2005, spent training with Southampton AC.

"I really enjoyed training with the group down there. There were a few internationals, Angus Maclean [former national-standard 1,500m runner], John Beattie [2hrs 23mins marathoner]... I used to train with their group



every Tuesday; Thursdays sometimes. But I got a girlfriend in the meantime..."

His sentence tails off, but no further explanation is needed – we all know about the cosmic difficulties of aligning relationship and training planets.

Baker evidently pushes himself hard in training, and I get the impression he has a tendency to overdo it: his Power of 10 profile proudly cites a session that comprised one-hundred 200m reps off 30-second recoveries. Why such a monstrous workout?

He laughs at my incredulous tone. "It was a funny year [2003]. I'd broken up with my girlfriend and I was just a bit bitter about it, and I was really taking it out on training and races, really attacking it."

Did that pay off?

"It did really. I was a bit depressed but I was running really well. I felt like I had nothing left to lose – just attack, attack, attack!"

He may not be in nihilistic attack-mode anymore, but the hunger for racing hasn't waned one jot. Baker competes almost every weekend, often on both days. Doesn't the second of the two performances inevitably suffer?

"I've found that if I prepare for it mentally, I'm kind of ready for it. In a couple of weeks' time, I'm going to do the Sussex [Cross Country] League race at Lancing on the Saturday afternoon, and then the Brighton Half-Marathon... that's at nine o'clock on the Sunday morning."

Can he really do himself justice in a half-marathon just hours after completing a county-level cross-country race?

"I'm hoping to win at Lancing, and hopefully... [pauses] be all right at Brighton."

His critics will knock him for even trying, but I mean it sincerely when I wish him well for both events as our chat draws to a close. Baker's race-them-all approach may not be scientific or even sensible, but it stems from an unfettered love of running as fast as he can – and isn't that what it's meant to be all about? **RT**

**WINNING BODY**

**Can you train to race (and win) every weekend?**

"James Baker's ability to compete and win so frequently suggests he has a high VO2max, strong metabolic thresholds and running economy, which he has developed through high-mileage training over the years. His VO2max is most likely maintained through high-intensity fartlek running. A possible benefit of regular racing is that he is working close to maximal physiological capacities, which in itself helps maintain a high VO2max. Baker is evidently genetically predisposed, in terms of body type, physiology and running biomechanics, to tolerate high-mileage training and continuous racing. Few runners are able to withstand such training loads; only a very small percentage of the running population can claim to be 'built' for the sport, so listening to your body is key. Elite athletes use periodisation programmes, and train to peak for key events by incorporating cycles of specific emphasis and recovery periods. It's one thing to perform well at local level, in each and every race you enter; the question is: how much faster could you become if you allowed sufficient time to optimise your preparation?"

**NICK TILLER, BASES-ACCREDITED SPORTS PHYSIOLOGIST**



DAY	DISTANCE (MI)	TIME (HH:MM)	TERRAIN/PACE/SESSION
Monday	12.75	01:21	Mixed terrain, hilly
Tuesday	12.75	01:19	Inc. 5x 3-2-1mins fast / 2mins easy
Wednesday AM	5	00:33	Road, easy
Wednesday PM	11	01:08	Steady run, flat
Thursday	15.5	01:41	Mixed terrain, muddy coastal paths
Friday	13	01:19	Inc. 5x 3-2-1 fast / 2mins easy
Saturday AM	7	00:47	Mixed terrain, muddy, easy
Saturday PM	6	00:35	Hilly XC, brisk
Sunday	5.25	00:35	Road, recovery
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>88.25</b>	<b>09:18</b>	



**WINNING MIND**

**How to think like a winner**

"To win consistently, time and time again, like James Baker does, you have to be not only fast but also able to perform under pressure, under the spotlight. This comes from the inside and outside. From inside, you

have to be able to risk being beaten and to either be OK with it (i.e. "It can happen, some day it undoubtedly will, but I won't be devastated by it") or to have supremely high levels of confidence so that you don't entertain the idea that it will happen. From the outside, others will 'know' you; they'll have read your stats, seen what you've won before, and will be

watching you, expecting you to do well. Moreover, if they are good enough, they'll be gunning to beat you. Having a winner's mindset means going out there and risking your performance under the spotlight, relishing the challenge – for you, that's what it is all about."

Dr Victor Thompson, clinical sports psychologist ([www.sportspsychologist.com](http://www.sportspsychologist.com))