



Race Preparation

TRAINING THE MIND

When we discuss the lure of the marathon and half marathon as an accomplishment that is physically attainable but a worthy challenge to our dedication, we touch on an aspect of training that is often ignored in our North American sporting culture: mental preparation. Of equal importance with the physical preparation is the development of confidence in our ability to succeed, combined with a realistic expectation for the highs and lows we will face in training and on race day.

Part of this mental training is the ability to cope with the discomfort we will eventually face. If we are properly trained and rested, and we pace ourselves properly, we do not need to hit the dreaded Wall on race day. In the course of our training and again on race day, however, there will be some discomfort along the way, and there is also the possibility that we'll get carried away with our speed on race day despite our cautious plans; we need to brace for the possible need to cope with the Wall even if we plan not to hit it.

There are two fundamentally opposite strategies for coping with this discomfort: dissociation and association.

DISSOCIATION AND ASSOCIATION

Dissociation is the easier of the two to implement. In this, we distract ourselves from the discomfort by thinking about other things. Talking with your running partners is the classic training dissociation that helps pass the hours on the long run; you can also use this on race day. Running the marathon or half marathon with your pace group can help make it seem like a normal training run. Other distractions can include the scenery along the route or the absurd outfits your competitors are wearing. You can daydream about the glory of the finish line, the friends awaiting you, a soothing massage, hot shower or huge bowl of ice cream. By taking your mind off what you are doing, the time passes quickly and you are less likely to feel your fatigue.

THE BENEFITS OF ASSOCIATION

The disadvantage of dissociation is that by not concentrating on what you are doing; you will be more likely to slow down as you tire. The opposite approach, association, is more difficult to implement; but if done properly it will help you to get the most out of your legs. Here, instead of distracting yourself, you concentrate on what you are feeling. Analyze everything you are going through, comparing the degree of fatigue that accrues during your race with the level you have planned on at each stage.

Concentrate on your split times, your running form, the remaining distance and terrain, the tactics you will use against your potential struggles. The biggest part of this in a marathon and half marathon is the analysis of your fatigue. Re-evaluate constantly whether you are on target, are able to speed up or need to slow down. This approach is more difficult, as it requires you to remain aware of your discomfort, and it takes a great deal of mental energy to remain this focused for 21 or 42k. If you can achieve this focus, however, it will help you to match your ideal pace and run your best.

VISUALIZATION VS. DAYDREAMING

To succeed at this approach you need to practice mentally in the same way you train physically. Mental rehearsal, or visualization, is crucial for maintaining your full concentration on race day. When we think about visualization, we often confuse this with daydreaming. The key difference is that daydreaming focuses on the result, while visualization concentrates on the process. Daydreaming is important in reaffirming the value of our goals, but visualization gives us the mechanics of achieving them. The latter is, of course, more work than the former, and we need the discipline to implement it; we need as well to keep from being too ambitious in the scope of each visualization session. To be effective, the session must be as detailed as possible, preferably in real time; rehearsing an event measured in hours all at once will lead to mental burnout as much as an all out race in training will bring on physical overtraining.

VISUALIZATION 101

Of course it is more feasible if every aspect of the race is familiar, another reason to practice physically as many aspects of the race as possible – including practice races and if possible a tour of the actual course. This will not always be possible, but the more you can do the better.

To make the process more manageable:

- Set aside a specific time, a couple times a week, when you will spend about fifteen minutes visualizing one segment of your race.
- Focus on a different aspect each time so the segments will add up to your entire event.

- Bring as much detail and as many senses to bear as possible: the feel of your actions, the sight of the course, the sound of the crowd, the smell of the blossom, the taste of your favorite gel. This will make your preparation more realistic and more forcefully applicable on race day.
 - When visualizing, build into your sessions as many different circumstances as possible. Envision perfect weather, but also heat, cold, wind, rain and snow.
 - Rehearse for the day you feel everything fall into place and you have unlimited energy, but plan as well for the day you did not sleep well or you ate something that didn't sit as well as it usually does.
 - Have an image of every possibility, good or bad, that is beyond your control. Visualize your reaction to these circumstances to achieve your goals. Make your reaction a realistic plan, not a daydream: for some circumstances this means visualizing a triumphant fulfillment of your fallback goal in the face of adverse conditions; for others you will envision a successful strategy for overcoming circumstances to achieve your original goal.
 - Plan to overcome the onset of race day jitters; when a rainstorm strikes, however, no confidence, no toughness and no strategy in the world will allow you to run as fast as you would in ideal weather.
- Use the fallback goals when necessary, but do not lean on them as an excuse to back out of a challenging effort when the going gets tough.

TAPERING

When you come to the final weeks of your training program, the urgency of the approaching event will often produce the impulse to train even harder. More than ever, it is crucial that you fight this urge. After months of training you are fit to run the race; the final weeks are aimed at tapping into that fitness rather than at building more. When discussing such things as the cutback weeks in the schedule, we touched on the fact that you will accumulate some fatigue during the weeks of hard training even if it stops short of burnout or injury. The cutback weeks address some of this, but to give your best for the big race you will need to be even better rested. To achieve this, taper back on the volume of running in the final weeks before your event.

TRAINING PHYSIOLOGY

This process is counterintuitive, but we need to remember two important aspects of training physiology. First, it takes a week and a half to two weeks for the effects of any workout to filter through and show up as improved fitness. Second, when the body loses fitness from detraining the process does not have an impact until after a week of inactivity. As a result, training through the last week will do you no good, and a week of rest will do you no harm for race day. A week of complete inactivity will stiffen the muscles and produce mental staleness, so you don't want to stop running completely; the idea is to scale back gradually in a process that mirrors the initial buildup.

THE IMPORTANCE OF SCALING BACK

Throughout these final couple of weeks, the volume changes but the types of workout do not. Now is not the time to introduce new elements to your program. If you are doing speed work, continue it, but with a gradual scaling back of the repetitions. You can make a small cut to the distance of each interval in order to run a LITTLE faster, but do not make a sudden change. The legs are used to running a certain range of speeds, and anything unfamiliar this late in the program risks leaving your legs sore for the big day. If you have delayed speed work prior to this point, do not start it now. You do not have time to derive significant benefit and you will beat your legs up mercilessly. Similarly, as your body gets more and more rested, you will be tempted to run the easy runs faster than usual. You can pick up the pace slightly, but not by much. You are resting, not switching from mileage to tempo runs. The last couple days, many runners will take the Friday off before a Sunday race and then run a mile or two the Saturday. By keeping this last run that short you are adding no significant fatigue, but will keep your legs at their sharpest state of readiness.

CHANGING YOUR FOCUS

Use these last two weeks as well to refocus on the non-running aspects of your program that may have fallen victim to creeping bad habits. Use the extra time freed up by the shortening of the workouts to make certain you are stretching properly. Again, do not add new stretches to your routine that may create soreness on race day. Make sure you get enough sleep, especially in the final week. The night before the race is too late to make up any sleep deficit. The most important single night for sleep is the second last night, though the week as a whole is more important than any one night. The final night, do not try suddenly going to bed hours earlier than usual or you could wind up lying awake worrying about not sleeping. Losing sleep that last night to pre-race nerves will do you no harm, but you do want to be at least relaxed when you wake up.

NUTRITION DURING THE TAPER

Your diet should retain its general principles through the taper. Again, renew your focus on hydration, and keep the balance of high carbohydrate foods. You will hear about carbohydrate loading regimens, but the most reliable method is to keep your normal volume of food while your mileage eases off. The last few days, try to cut back still further on fats and proteins, but stick to familiar foods. The day before, try to avoid heavily spiced foods. Although the pasta dinner is a pre-race tradition, many runners find that lunch is the most important meal that day. Everything those last couple days should be easily digestible, but focus on complex carbohydrates.

RACE DAY TACTICS

Once you get to the starting line, most of the hard part is over. It is time to enjoy the results of all the training you have put in. However, you do need to run a sound tactical race in order to put it all together. It can be a source of endless frustration to have done everything right for 17 weeks, only to get careless on the big day. For the marathon and half marathon, your strategy will be simpler than in shorter races, as you have less room to deviate from the principle of an evenly paced run.

THE START LINE

Starting you should want to be lined up at the start line close to the position you expect to finish in. Err on the side of caution so you can get the confidence boost of passing other runners rather than suffer the deflating experience of being passed by large numbers. Start a little cautiously as well, perhaps 5 to 10 seconds per kilometer slower than the pace you will average for most of the race. After two to three miles, accelerate gradually to your race pace. In larger events, the crowd of people at the start will force you into a conservative pace early on; if the pace is slower or lasts longer than you planned, let it happen. Many runners waste more energy than they can spare by weaving between competitors, sprinting and braking inefficiently and growing tense at the prospect of lost seconds. Go with the pace the traffic permits and wait for openings to pass smoothly and efficiently. Once you are able, try to settle into one pace that you will hold for the remainder of the race.

BEYOND THE START LINE

You will speed up a little on downhills and slow on the inclines, and should be able to accelerate a little in the final mile. On the whole, however, any departure from an even effort will be wasted energy that will slow you in the end. If your primary goal is to finish, you will already be running conservatively to guarantee relative comfort for all 21 or 42 kilometers; if you are seeking a time goal you will want to hold to the even pace that represents the most efficient means of reaching the finish line on time

WHILE ON THE COURSE

Try as best you can to run the shortest distance allowed. On a winding road try to run on the inside curve of all turns, instead of sticking completely with the left, right or centre of the road. These tangents follow the path the course is measured by to achieve 21.1 or 42.2k, so this is the best path to follow if the traffic will allow it. While it would be cheating to leave the road to cut across someone's lawn or parking lot, it is not necessary to add distance by swinging wide on each curve either.

HYDRATION BEYOND THE START LINE

Remember as well to keep your hydration and walking breaks. Drink at every water station even early in the race, as it is the water you take before you are thirsty that will do you the most good later on. You can use these water stations as revised timing for your walking breaks, but keep these breaks in some form. Unless you are aiming at a marathon time under three hours (1:30 for the half), the recovery you get even early on will allow you to maintain your speed in the later stages and gain back more time in the finish than you initially invested.

THE FINISH LINE AND BEYOND CONGRATULATIONS! You did it!!!!

At “the” magical finish line, take in the atmosphere, collect your medal and celebrate. Try to keep moving, however. Keep the legs as loose as you can in the circumstances; look for the thermal blankets being handed out on cooler days and grab your change of clothing as quickly as you can. As your heart rate drops and your body cools off, you will notice how much you chill with lowered blood sugar. Make sure you have packed warmer clothing than you normally require for the temperature. Once safely into dry clothing, get to the food tent and begin the process of refueling. Don’t forget to include fluids (not beer) even if cold liquid on a cool day does not sound appealing. Try to take advantage of the massage tent, and if needed the medical tent. (Having run a sensible race, of course YOU will not need this...) If you can, track down your running buddies to share your experiences. For the remainder of the day, keep eating, drinking and resting, but if you can, get out for a walk to loosen the muscles. A warm bath with Epsom salts and more massage will help as well.

THE DAY AFTER THE MARATHON

The next day begins the process of recovering from the season. The race itself will inflict on your legs a significant level of fatigue even if you run conservatively. This escalates if you pursue an ambitious time goal. On top of this, you have just gone through the physical and mental strain of a long training season. Your mind and body both need time to recover from both the training and racing. Unfortunately, the mind tends to race ahead of the legs, producing one of the more hazardous periods for overtraining and injury. Though some literature will question this, a good rule of thumb for getting over this wear and tear is one day of rest for every mile raced: in round figures two weeks for the half marathon and four for the full. Use good judgment and plan what you want to do next.

See you at the wrap-up party!!