

TIPS FOR A SUCCESSFUL MARATHON

Welcome to fall. The heat has finally calmed down and the weather is conducive to running! OK, it's not, but it is fall and somewhere it is cool. An experience that many runners are sharing this fall and winter is training for and doing a marathon. Before you embark on this endeavor, you may want to give some thought to what you need to do to make your marathon a success. Whether your goal is to finish or to set a new land speed record, you want to think about what it is EXACTLY that will increase your chances of succeeding.

I advise against strictly following a marathon plan that you find in a book or a magazine. Typically, these plans are thought out and are a good place to start, but they are meant to be used as a guide, not an absolute. We are all different and we must train that way. These plans are built one-size-fits-all, but they don't. Say two runners use the same mile build-up plan. Let's further say that the miles called for in a certain week are 50. Now, a faster runner may do all of his/her training runs at 8 min/mile pace and a slower runner may do his/hers at a 10 min/mile pace. The faster runner is doing 400 minutes of running per week and the slower runner is doing 500. The slower runner actually runs 1:40 longer that week. How far, how frequent, and how fast we run is individual, so you must start with where your running fitness is, then decide how to improve it.

What does it mean to be marathon ready? First, you have to be aerobically fit. This happens by doing lots of LSD (long slow distance) training. There is no exact number for how much and how often. But the most important factor is also the most ignored, and that is intensity. To improve your aerobic system, you must train at or below 75% of your maximum heart rate. As for how long, some marathoners go as long as three hours on their long day, and some effuse to do more than 90 minutes. So again, it depends on your history. It would make no sense for an injury-prone athlete to try to attempt 22 miles on a long day preceding a marathon. For others, this may be OK.

Another key ingredient to a successful marathon is how anaerobically fit are you? Or how high is your anaerobic threshold (AT)? This is what I call cruising speed. It is the key indicator that determines how fast you can go. If your AT is high, then you can cruise at speeds that are higher. The only way to improve your AT is through speedwork. Speedwork takes the form of either intervals or tempo runs. Again, there is not magic number, but typically two days of speedwork a week works well.

The next critical component is overload. Can your joints, muscles, tendons/ligaments and bones handle the pounding? We can have a fit aerobic system and go forever. We can have a fit AT and go fast, but if our bodies can't handle the distance, we won't have a successful 26.2. So how much volume is needed. Again, there is no magic number, but the key is overload. This means to begin where you are and progressively add a little stress (volume) each week. When you take it in steps like this, your bones, tendons, ligaments and muscles adapt by getting stronger – more resilient. But if you overload too much, you overstress, and the result will be injury. There is a fine line that only you can find. Typically, if you add 5-10% of volume each week, you will be on target. You don't have to go all the way to 26.2 before the big day to get this effect. Personally, I'll build my long day up to 2.5 hours. Last year, I went up to three hours on my

long day. This was too long, since my legs stayed dead. So again, it's trial and error. The key is to understand what you are attempting to manipulate.

The next effective strategy is racing correctly on race day. So many people bust their butts for six months leading up to a marathon, and then they blow it all on race day. You can blow it on race day by not eating enough during the event, or not drinking enough, or not pacing properly. Your body can store two hours worth of glycogen. You hear of people hitting the wall? That's what that is – no more glycogen. Once glycogen is totally gone, you can't recover. You need to have some glycogen to process ingested sugar, so you need to do what we call glycogen sparing. This means ingesting sugar long before glycogen has run out. Take in a GU or gel or Gatorade every 30 minutes and you will be fine. Another component is dehydration. If you get dehydrated, you will fatigue prematurely, so make sure you drink 8 ounces of fluid every 20 minutes. Finally, to ensure a good day, pace right! Use your head when you set a pace goal. You should have an idea based on shorter races you have run recently. The marathon is an aerobic race. It needs to be run under your AT. If you run it around your 5K or 10K pace, you will use glycogen too rapidly and you will blow up.

There are many things to think about while planning for your marathon. What is it you need to work on? Do you get injured easily? Start your build-up early and increase slowly. Do you know you can handle the distance but really want to PR the event? Stress speedwork in your plan. Have you blown it on race day? Why? Did you not eat or drink enough? Did you run out of the box at your 10K pace? Learn discipline. The marathon is a race where the victor is not only fit, but knows how to use his or her head for more than a visor holder.