So You Want To Run A Marathon !

By Michael Jacques

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No other event has captured the imagination of the masses like the Marathon. The unique combination of history and personal endeavor has cemented this most global of goals as the world's challenge of choice. Despite its popularity, the marathon remains something of a mystery. From the world's fastest right down to weekend warriors no one has ever perfected this peculiar distance. Olympic champions line up with the same gnawing doubts as a rookie, their stomach in knots and their minds asking the eternal question: "Can I do this?"

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If the marathon weren't so damned hard it wouldn't be the classic challenge that it is. But as hard as it is, running a marathon needn't be the misery that popular myth would have you believe. Whether you're a first timer or looking to knock a few minutes of your best time, a bit of knowledge can help make your goal not only achievable but enjoyable too.

Working With Your Body
Most people think that marathon training is all about mileage. It's not! It's about how much mileage you can handle consistently, which means that it's all about how well you recover.

To appreciate this you need to understand how your body works. In a nutshell, the human being is nothing more than an adaptive organism. When life throws us a few stresses, the body adapts to handle that stress. For example, when you catch a cold you get ill, but the body eventually builds immunity. Running works the same: If you run regularly the body gets better at handling those stresses and we become better runners!

Of course, nothing is ever as simple as it seems. The body just doesn't adapt to stress by itself. It adapts when you rest. So, just as sleep allows you to get through your life and rest helps you build immunity against that cold, well planned recovery allows your body to adapt to your training loads.

Hard or Easy or Both
What this means in running terms is adopting a regime of harder runs and easier runs. So long runs followed by shorter runs, hillier runs with flatter runs, faster runs with slower runs and road runs with trail runs. At the same time you should allow your lifestyle to fit with your training by scheduling easier training for higher stress days at work like Mondays and Fridays.

Recovery strategies such as these allow you to handle day to day training. But to avoid injury and overtraining during three or four months of marathon training you also need to schedule an easier week every month or so. During this easy week you reduce volume by 40 or 50 percent to give the body a chance you recharge to get ready for more of the same.

By following this "hard/easy" regime your running will become more consistent, which means over time you can gradually increase the amount of training and force the adaption process higher and higher, which means you get fitter and fitter.

Getting Started
The one thing that all marathon runners have in common is self-doubt. No marathoner ever lines up without wondering if they have done enough training. But how much is enough?

Olympic marathoners train twice a day and clock up to 250k a week, but if your goal is simply finishing then 70 to 80k is plenty. As long as that includes a weekly long run that gradually builds up to 30k, you'll get through your marathon. But first things first.

Once you feel fit enough to run three or more days a week and can cover one hour without too much trouble, then you can think about training for a marathon.

But to enjoy the process and run a bit closer to your potential it's better to spend two or three months building to a half marathon, have a break, and then spend another two or three months building to your full marathon.

The general rule of thumb is to increase your runs by no more than 10 percent per week. So if your longest run is currently one hour then in six to eight weeks you should comfortably be handling a two-hour run, which means you're ready for a half marathon…

But before you kick-off this build up, we need to make sure the type of running you do is specific to the demands of the marathon.

Endurance Is Everything
Regardless of distance, the secret to good running is having the endurance to complete the distance at the required pace.

Endurance for runners involves two basic elements:

1) Aerobic Endurance – the ability of the heart to pump large volumes of blood to supply the working muscles with oxygen.

2) Muscular Endurance – the ability of your leg muscles to propel the body for the required length of time while withstanding the impact.

The best way to achieve both these elements is running at least every second day, but you'll progress faster if you can build up to running two or three days in a row and then take a day off. Most people can get through a marathon on a diet of three or four runs per week. But if you want to enjoy the experience then four or five runs per week is better. Anyone serious about exploring their potential would be looking at five to seven runs a week.

As well as consistency, the type of running you do has a big bearing on the consistency needed to develop endurance. To be able to stay consistent you can't do this regular running too fast. If you run too hard, you tire earlier which means you have to stop or reduce the amount of running, which means you won't be building endurance.

The key is to do your regular running at around 65 to 75 percent of maximum heart rate, which is an effort where you could still hold some sort of conversation while running. For most people, this is also the effort/pace they'll run in their marathon.

You can also improve endurance by alternating longer runs with shorter runs. So if most of your runs are currently 60min long, try changing to alternate 75min and 45min runs and you'll notice very quick improvements in fitness. This is the process of adaptation we talked about earlier, where the longer runs continually push the boundaries of your endurance while the shorter run allows you to recover for another longer run.

Over time the goal is to build one long run per week up to 3hrs or 30-35k. You should also try and do these longer runs on the road.

Road running gets a bad rap because of injury risk. But for marathon running you need to get the body conditioned to that impact and the safest way to do this is doing the longer runs on the road and the easier runs off road to aid recovery.

Strength

Regardless of how hilly your marathon might be, some well-placed hill work in our training will help you handle any marathon better.

Hills build added leg strength and aerobic endurance, which makes you more efficient, which helps conserve energy and give you more chance of lasting the distance. But hill work also requires more recovery, so limit hilly runs to one of two per week.

One hilly run might include several shorter sharper hills. Another run might include longer more gradual hills. But otherwise these are normal runs, but on hillier terrain. The exception is if your marathon is a hilly course; in this case some of your long runs should be hilly.

The Need for Speed

If your running goals are simply fitness and enjoyment, then a good amount of relaxed running will see you through a marathon. In fact, most people end up completing their marathon at around their normal training pace. But if you'd like to explore your potential a little, then you'll need to do some faster and higher intensity running.

The need for speed is three fold:

1) To build biomechanical efficiency at speed, which means you use less energy.
2) To build a higher level of oxygen uptake, which means your speed at aerobic effort improves.
3) To develop pace judgment relative.

What we're talking about here is improving efficiency. We do this by doing some of our running at a faster but still aerobic effort. Training like this might be done once or twice per week, with the following being useful workouts:

Tempo Runs: A 90min run with 30 to 60min at marathon goal pace, or 30min at half marathon pace.

Time Trials: A 60min run that includes a time trial of 5k to 10k. A race is even better.

Interval Sessions: A 60 to 90min run that alternates 5min at 10k pace with 2-5min easy. Start with three reps and build to six.

Training Schedule

The following four-month marathon schedule is a good example for someone who currently runs at least three times per week and can comfortably run 60min non-stop.

It starts by building up for a half marathon & then continues to the full marathon. Note the hard day/easy day approach, the easier week very month and the gradual increases, all of which ensures that your training stays consistent. Because in running, consistency is always king.

4 U	Wk 1	Wk 2	Wk 3	Wk 4	Wk 5	Wk 6	Wk7	Wk 8	Wk 9	W10	Wk 11	Wk 12	Wk 13	Wk 14	Wk 15	Wk 16
MON	Day Off	Day Off	Day Off	Day Off	Day Off	Day Off	Day Off	Day Off	Day Off	Day Off	Day Off	Day Off	Day Off	Day Off	Day Off	Day Off
TUES	40min easy	50min easy	1hr easy	45min easy	1hr easy	70min easy	80min easy	45min easy	Day Off	80min easy	1.5hrs hilly	45min inc 20min tempo	1.5hrs hilly	1.5hrs hilly	30min easy	45min easy
WED	Day Off	Day Off	30min easy	Day Off	30min hilly	45min hilly	1hr hilly	Day Off	30min easy	1hr hilly	1hr easy	Day Off	1hr easy	1hr easy	45min easy	Day Off
THUR	40min easy	50min easy	1hr easy	45min easy	1hr easy	70min easy	80min easy	30min easy	45min easy	80min easy	1.5hrs inc 30min tempo	45min hilly	1.5hrs inc 30min tempo	1.5hrs inc 30min tempo	1hr inc 30min goal pace	30min easy
FRI	Day Off	Day Off	Day Off	Day Off	Day Off	Day Off	Day Off	Day Off	Day Off	Day Off	Day Off	Day Off	Day Off	Day Off	Day Off	Day Off
SAT	10k easy	30min easy	40min easy	14k easy	40min easy	50min easy	1hr easy	15min easy	1hr easy	55min easy	60min easy	25k easy	60min hilly	60min hilly	1hr easy	15min easy
SUN	Day Off	12k easy	14k easy	Day Off	16k easy	18k easy	20k easy	Half Marathon	15-20k easy	20-25k easy	25-30k easy	Day Off	30k easy	30k easy	40-60min inc 30min goal pace	Full Marathon
Hints	Establish consistency. Introduce longer runs.			Recovery Week, then gradually increasing volume & introducing strength work.				Set a goal time for pace	Recovery, then building to peak volume & introducing tempo runs at marathon or half marathon pace.			Recovery Week	Peak Training!		Gradual taper to freshen for race day. Set a goal for pace.	