# 13 Rules for Marathon Training

By Jesse Kropelnicki
*Your 26.2*

You have committed yourself to train for a marathon. The journey is long and will require a tremendous amount of time and sacrifice, the forebears of anything worth pursuing. Your preparations will challenge you on both physical and mental planes, the likes of which you have never experienced. There will be times when you are on top of the world. There will be others, when all you want to do is quit. There will be sunny days, snowy days and everything in between. As you embark upon this expedition, let these tips help guide you toward your goal.

**Have a Plan**

Anyone who has ever had a good coach knows the importance of having a plan. As we get older, we can also appreciate why our coach got so frustrated when we veered away from his or her instructions. Perhaps we don't always appreciate our coach's foresight. But, with age comes wisdom, and we start to recognize that all of our training should have a very specific purpose.

As you head into marathon training, you should be able to identify the different types of training days and how they relate to your upcoming race. Your training plan should address your specific limiters, and provide a gradual increase of stress through volume and/or intensity.

Without an appropriate plan, most runners will increase their volume and/or intensity much too quickly resulting in injury or burnout, which kill consistency—the key to unlocking your potential.

**Go Easy on the Easy Days**

Recovery days should focus on just that—recovery. Too many runners try to use these days to further develop fitness. That should not be the purpose of the day. Take the opportunity to allow your body to heal from whatever stresses it has recently endured. It's a time to let blood move through your system promoting lean muscle repair.

Failure to allow muscle repair will lead to peripheral fatigue (i.e. tired legs), and then sub-par performances in your coming workouts. It becomes an infinite vicious cycle, typically ending in burnout and/or injury. Use recovery workouts, today, to prepare yourself to push your limiters tomorrow.

**Go Hard on the Hard Days**

Hard days should always be approached at a best sustainable effort. If you are planning to do five, one-mile repeats, then they should be paced at the highest intensity that you can maintain for five of them; not four, not six.

If paced properly, the last interval will be run at an all out effort, but will result in a time/pace that is either equal, or slightly faster, than the previous four. You want to be able to walk away from your best effort days very spent, with little to nothing left in the tank. To do so, you really need to focus on taking the easy days very easy, so that you do not enter the hard days with any residual fatigue. These are the ying and yang of effective run training.

As far as recovery from hard efforts: If a workout leaves you greatly taxed, saying "whew, that was tough," it should be followed by a day focused on recovery.

**Ease Into Your Workouts**

Think of your training like an elastic band. You get much more out of it from a long slow stretch, than from a quick and sudden snap. Take this approach to every single workout that you do. The idea is to allow your soft tissue to progressively adapt to larger and larger loads of stress.

Don't leave the door at the intensity that you plan to hold for the day. This will spike your HR, and push you more towards anaerobic energy utilization, rather than making your aerobic physiology more robust.

Instead, start your runs on the easier side, increasing the intensity as your body becomes more adapted to the workload. This will help to prevent injury, and ensure that your runs get faster and faster throughout. This is especially important in the heat, where the body has a more difficult time cooling itself, and on treadmills.

There is little to be gained, both physically and mentally, by overloading your system too early into a workout, and then slogging through its remainder. Show some early restraint early on and always finish strong.

**Never Bonk**

I am sure that we have all experienced it, at one time or another: cold sweats; bleary-eyes; slowed pace despite a high perceived exertion. A "bonk" occurs when your muscles become depleted of glycogen. In essence, it is a period of low blood sugar.

The physiological impact of bonking is too great to allow it to happen. In the absence of muscle glycogen, the body actually turns on itself breaking down muscle to create glycogen through other means. We never want to see the breakdown of lean muscle mass, that's one of the things that helps us prevent injury.

Bonking can be avoided by fueling yourself properly during training. Never step out the door without at least two gels (or one bar)—more than what you believe is required for your workout. You should have at least one third of your body weight in carbohydrates per hour.

**Use a Recovery Drink**

A good recovery drink is often overlooked, but can really act as a springboard towards getting the most from your training. Better recovery from one workout will only lead to better performances in the next.

There is no better way to improve the physiological benefit of your workouts and improve your overall recovery than to replenish muscle glycogen immediately following a workout. A good recovery drink should be used following all workouts that are draining, such as track repeats and long runs.

It is often thought that a good recovery drink will be high in protein, in order to promote muscle repair. While protein is a very important component, it is actually more important that the drink contain a high glycemic carbohydrate such as dextrose. If this high glycemic carbohydrate can be coupled with an easily digestible protein, such as whey, then you are really onto something. The most effective recovery drinks will contain a 4:1 carbohydrate to protein ratio. This will help to replenish muscle glycogen and begin the muscle recovery process.

**Lose the Loose Baggage**

If you were wearing a 10-pound backpack on the morning of your marathon, what would you do before the start? You'd take it off! The same applies to excess weight. Of all the preparations you make, this will have the single largest impact on your race performance.

First, let me repeat the "excess" part as this only applies to athletes carrying extra weight.

It can take years of consistent training to realize the improvements that a 5-pound weight loss can produce. The typical aerobic improvement from year to year, assuming consistent training, is about seven seconds per mile. If you are carrying extra weight, each pound lost is worth about three seconds per mile. Those extra five pounds that you are carrying are worth about 15 seconds/mile. Recognizing that kind of gain would normally take more than two years of training. So, lose nature's backpack and fast forward your development.

**Limit Intake of Grains and Refined Sugars**

Just because you are training for a marathon does not mean that you are entitled to eat anything that you want. Grains and processed sugars should be avoided, unless you are eating them within an hour of an upcoming workout, during a workout, or within a post-workout window that is equal in length to the workout itself.

This will help to avoid unnecessary spikes in your blood sugar, which can lead to the storage of body fat. In addition, this limited intake of grains and sugars between workouts will leave plenty of room for more nutrient-dense fruits, vegetables and proteins.

**Sleep at Least 7.5 Hours Each Night**

This is probably one of the most overlooked details by runners. Life is busy: Between work, family, friends, and training, something's gotta give. But it shouldn't be sleep.

Think of sleep as an integral part of your training regimen. Physical training breaks you down. Rest and nutrition build you up. All of the training in the world is useless without proper rest (and nutrition).

If the time that you are devoting to running is habitually taking away from your ability to get 7.5 hours of sleep each night, and you are as time-efficient as possible in the other areas of your life, then perhaps you should devote less time to running. Sure, your volume will be lighter, but your ability to absorb all aspects of your training will be that much better. A well-rested runner is a fast runner.

**Race the Distance That You Are Ready For**

Give yourself sufficient time to train for a marathon. If you do not have adequate training volume for your event, your performance will suffer significantly due to system failure. You also run the very strong risk of injury and/or an extreme amount of required recovery time following the race. Before signing up, make sure your body is ready to handle the mileage.

You should be able to hit at least two thirds of your critical volume for your race distance. Critical volume for a marathon is run in the two peak training weeks of your plan, which usually fall within six weeks of your race. For a marathon, critical volume should be around 60 miles. Therefore, you should be able to run 60 miles total, over the course of two weeks, at the peak of your

training. At a minimum you should be able to run two thirds of this critical distance—which is 40 miles—during the critical period.

If you don't think you can build this this kind of mileage between now and then, you should probably choose a different marathon, or sign up for a shorter race.

**Don't Race Too Often**

In the Bible, gluttony is described as one of the seven deadly sins. In running circles, race gluttony carries the same fate. Once the season starts, be careful not to race too often. Most races should require some sort of a taper and recovery period, and can therefore infringe on your training volume. As your training volume (average of the previous six weeks' total volume) begins to fall, race performances will decline, due to an eroding aerobic base and loss of sport-specific feel.

This is very common in athletes who are chasing that elusive Boston qualifying time. If the first attempt at qualifying is not successful, it is a very common reaction to try again, too soon, without putting in a proper cycle of training. This will often lead to another missed qualification attempt. This can create an infinite loop of too frequent racing, lack of training, inadequate recovery and missed opportunities. This is compounded mentally with discouragement due to sub-par performances.

**Never Train Through Races**

There are a few reasons that we do not recommend training through races. First, and foremost, going into a race already fatigued sets the mental groundwork for excuses even before the gun sounds. When you don't perform as you would have liked, it is much too easy to say "Well, I was training through this one." This is a bad mental cycle of excuses to get into. You should be 100 percent ready to go every single time that you toe a starting line.

It wouldn't kill most runners to take a little extra recovery. Runners are notorious over-trainers. When was the last time that you took a true recovery week? A week of intentionally lower volume, with a couple of planned off days. Taking a few days of recovery, leading into your races is probably something that you need, anyhow. Training through a race simply pushes that recovery to some other time.

Lastly, if going into a race forces you to juggle your run volume, you are much better off putting in the extra hours following the race, as opposed to cramming it in the day before. This allows for proper rest leading into the race, and then a very good quality run on race day. Going into a race with a fully recovered peripheral system allows for much better stimulation of your core system. This will give you a better opportunity to push your limiters. This is a much better proposition than two mediocre running days. Racing is hard enough. Why sabotage it with your training?

**Know That There Is No Magic**

You can look all you want, but you won't find it. Nothing has ever successfully replaced good, old fashioned hard work. You may have the greatest training plan the world has ever seen. You still have to execute it.

Each of the above facets can be applied to any training plan that you use. Taken piecemeal, their value remains inherent, but is limited. Together, they can completely change your life as a runner. These are the non-negotiables that are the difference between training with purpose and just going out for a run.

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