

3 Ways to Run a Better Fall Marathon

By [Matt Fitzgerald](#)
For [Active.com](#)

The [marathon](#) is a tough nut to crack. Twenty-six miles is a long way to run, let alone to race for time. Few runners master the distance on their first try. Most of us need to gain experience with the runner's ultimate challenge before we are ready to run the best marathon we are capable of. But that's what makes the marathon so intriguing. Your first marathon puts a stake in the ground. You come away from it knowing you could do better, so you take what you learn and apply it to the pursuit of a new PR in the second...and so on.

Individual runners make different mistakes, or are limited by different factors, in their [first marathons](#). Some don't train hard enough. Others make nutritional errors. Still other don't do all they could to arrive at the start line healthy. Nevertheless, there are some very common training-based limiters to performance in first marathons. These limiters can be flipped around to become training-based opportunities to improve in subsequent marathons.

Are you running a marathon this fall? If so, let it be more than just *another* marathon—make it a *better* marathon by incorporating these three simple changes into your training.

Do a second weekly longer run.

Marathon training for many runners is all about the long run. Done once a week, usually on Saturday or Sunday, the long run, which becomes progressively longer from week to week, is held responsible for yielding the majority of the fitness gains a marathoner needs to achieve his or her goals on race day. The other runs in the week provide a foundation that enables the runner to tackle those long runs.

There's only so much a long run can do to improve your fitness, however. Elite marathon runners typically don't run any farther in their long runs than everyday marathoners do. The difference is that the elites run a lot more than the rest of us throughout the week.

Studies have shown that weekly mileage is a better predictor of marathon performance than the distance of the longest training run. In other words, given equal ability, a runner who runs 45 miles a week with a longest run of 18 miles will probably run a faster marathon than one who runs 35 miles a week with a longest run of 22 miles.

To increase your weekly mileage, and thereby improve your marathon performance in a manageable way, try doing a moderately long run each week in addition to your long run. For example, suppose a hard week of marathon training for you currently looks like this:

M	T	W	Th	F	Sa	Su	Total
Off	6 mi	6 mi	6 mi	Off	20 mi	Off	38 miles

Try doing this instead:

M	T	W	Th	F	Sa	Su	Total
Off	6 mi	12 mi	4 mi	Off	20 mi	Off	42 miles

Run more hills.

Running uphill is a great way to build specific strength and aerobic capacity in marathon training. Another virtue of [running uphill](#) is that it allows you to attain intensities similar to running fast on flat ground without the pounding that comes with doing so. Many runners try to avoid running uphill, precisely because it is harder than running on flat ground, and especially if they are training for a marathon on a flat course. But if you want to run a better marathon, you need to do some hard running, and going uphill may serve you better than running intervals at the track, which aren't any easier.

There are various ways to incorporate hill running into your training. I recommend that you do some of your long runs on relatively hilly courses. This will toughen up your legs more than a run of equal distance of flat terrain. In addition, run a set of uphill intervals once every 10 to 14 days. Start with shorter intervals—for example, 8 x 30 seconds—at a very high intensity. Gradually increase the duration—up to 5 x 3 minutes—and lower the intensity of these intervals as your marathon draws closer.

Finish fast.

When runners fail to achieve their goals in marathons, the last 5 miles are usually to blame. Most runners have little trouble maintaining a reasonable marathon goal pace for the first 21 miles, but then they slow down inexorably in the last few. To prevent this from happening to you in your next marathon, include some fast finishes in your [long runs](#).

Instead of running the full 15 or 18 or 20 miles at a steady, moderate, pace, run all but the last 1 to 3 miles at that pace and then increase your tempo to the end. Challenging yourself to run faster when you're already fatigued will stimulate physiological and mental adaptations that will enable you to avoid slowing down in the last miles of your next marathon.

Active Expert Matt Fitzgerald is the author of [RUN: The Mind-Body Method of Running by Feel](#), and a coach and training intelligence specialist for [PEAR Sports](#).