

After The Marathon

You're fit but finished. Here's how to beat postrace blues.

By Scott Douglas From the August 2004 issue of Runner's World.

Immediately following her first [marathon](#), in Chicago in 2003, Lisa Golaszewski did what she thought you're supposed to do: not a whole hell of a lot. Having devoted the prior several months to 25-mile weeks and plenty of long runs, Golaszewski, 33, thought it was time to kick back and relax. "I had no plan, not even mileage goals," she says. "I hadn't given life after the marathon a single thought."

Problem was, the St. Louis resident hadn't counted on running's equivalent of postpartum depression. By the end of October, without the marathon as motivation, Golaszewski's running went adrift. Instead of capitalizing on the fitness she had gained during her training, she felt drained of energy and inspiration. Some weeks she ran only once. Desperate for motivation, she signed up for April's [St. Louis Marathon](#), "but my heart wasn't in it," says Golaszewski. She trained only 15 miles per week for the race and ran slower than she had in Chicago.

Last year, Golaszewski took a different approach. While still training for October's [LaSalle Bank Chicago Marathon](#), she signed up for the [Houston Marathon](#)--coming up in January. After an initial week of recovery, she gradually added quality and volume back into her training, and continued long runs. "I used a truncated version of one of Hal Higdon's marathon plans," she says. Her reward was no postmarathon letdown, and a PR of 4:04 at Houston.

Golaszewski learned what top runners and coaches have long known--the high that comes from a good marathon can quickly morph into a major downer if you don't have a plan for the aftermath. That plan doesn't have to culminate in another marathon, or even another race, but it should contain some meaningful goals, such as maintaining a specific weekly mileage or just making sure you run a certain number of days every week. Of course, it's important to be flexible with your goals to avoid injury. But after running a marathon, you're at a very high fitness level, and with the right training focus you can make the most of it.

For many runners, Golaszewski's defense strategy--planning a second marathon before crossing the finish line of the first--is a bit overwhelming. An excellent alternative is to concentrate on shorter [races](#). "Marathon training leaves you with a great base of aerobic fitness that doesn't vanish immediately after your marathon is over," says Jason Lehmkuhle, a 2:16 marathoner in St. Paul, Minnesota. "You can capitalize on that fitness, sharpen your speed, and turn it all into fast 5-Ks and 10-Ks."

But having postmarathon racing plans doesn't mean pounding out a track workout two days after your marathon. Instead, you need to focus on [recovery](#) in the first week after the race so that you're better able to progress in training in the subsequent weeks. During those weeks, try running on grass and trails to lessen the pounding on your still-sore muscles, and listen to your body. "The last thing you want to do is force racing again if your body isn't ready," says Lehmkuhle.

Sonja Friend-Uhl, an online running coach and national-class runner, says signs that you're rushing your recovery include prolonged fatigue, loss of appetite, feeling lethargic on your runs for several days in a row, severe mood swings or depression, illness, and, of course, any [running-related injury](#). Encountering any of these symptoms means you may need to scale back on your post-race goals, but just a bit. So instead of racing that postmarathon Turkey Trot 5-K, give yourself some more time and focus on the Jingle Bell Jog the next month.

But the time to start thinking about life after the marathon is now. "Create your postrace goals during the month before your event," advises Friend-Uhl. "Write them down so you can keep your mind stimulated with future endeavors."

If you're afraid that planning your postmarathon running so far in advance will distract you from the singular focus your earlier marathon demands, Friend-Uhl doesn't buy that line of thinking. "A great benefit of planning ahead is that you're not setting yourself up for the idea that this marathon is the culminating event of your running career," she says. "Having postrace goals on the horizon reminds you that this one race does not define you as a runner or a person."

Regardless of what your postmarathon plans are, experts agree your general approach to training in the four weeks after the marathon should be this: Recover initially, then gradually add quality and volume so that you emerge injury-free, mentally fresh, and able to capitalize on the fitness you built during marathon training. Here's a week-by-week guide that will get you there. But remember: Don't feel obligated to follow this religiously if your body is telling you otherwise. If you feel acute soreness or have lingering fatigue, progress to the next week's training only when you can comfortably complete the preceding week's goal.

Weeks After the Marathon	1	2	3	4
Training Goal for Week	Recover as quickly as possible.	Resume regular running.	Get your legs moving fast again.	Consolidate fitness gained during marathon training.
Key Ways to Meet the Week's Goal	Combine minimal, easy running with walking and other forms of cross-training, such as easy cycling or water running, that will improve blood flow to your legs. Get a massage and try to get extra sleep. Eat frequent high-carb meals to replenish your energy stores.	Stick with easy runs from 20 to 60 minutes long. Run mostly with friends and maintain a conversational pace. Wear a heart-rate monitor and don't go above 70 percent of your maximum heart rate.	After one run, do six to eight 100-meter pick-ups, focusing on a quick turnover while remaining relaxed. Do the middle few miles of another run at your marathon pace.	After warming up on one run, do an unstructured fartlek workout, with six to 10 surges of 30 seconds to three minutes, and with as much recovery between as you feel you need. Do a long run that's between 2/3 and 3/4 of your normal premarathon long run.
Mileage Goal for the Week	Up to 25 percent of average premarathon mileage	25 to 50 percent of average premarathon mileage	50 to 70 percent of average premarathon mileage	60 to 80 percent of average premarathon mileage