

Are You Ready to Run a Marathon?

By Matt Forsman
For Active.com

Running impacts people in profound ways. The impact it has on people extends way beyond the physical. Running has a way of acting as a catalyst for undertaking audacious goals. The impossible becomes vaguely plausible, if not entirely possible.

Additionally, there are some inevitabilities associated with running. It's inevitable that you will experience muscle soreness. It's inevitable that you will find yourself markedly fatigued. It's inevitable that some friends will think you're crazy. But, perhaps the biggest 'inevitability' when it comes to running is considering the idea of [running a marathon](#).

Tackling 26.2 miles calls out to runners like a siren. It's larger than life. It's mythical. It's epic. It's terrifying. It's sexy. But it's not a trivial undertaking.

With marathon season in full swing and the marathon siren calling out loudly to any who will listen, it's inevitable that those who have yet to run 26.2 miles may start to wonder 'if they're ready.

If you fall into this demographic and your response to the questions below is largely affirmative, you may be ready to tackle the beast known as the marathon.

Have you been running consistently for at least a year?

Some [training programs](#) out there seduce people with a message that sounds something like, 'from the couch to 26.2 miles in six months'. It's an incredibly powerful and seductive message.

Unfortunately, it's a somewhat irresponsible message. If you've never run in your entire life and you've historically been sedentary, training for a marathon in six months could be like playing with fire. You might be able to pull it off, but you might incur a serious injury that prevents you from running for months or longer.

A much better approach would be to get into a regular running routine for a year. This gives your body ample time to adapt to the demands of the sport. If you've already been running on a fairly consistent basis for a year or more and haven't had any major issues, the time for ramping up to a marathon may be at hand. If not, think twice.

Have you knocked out a half marathon or two?

It's hard to explain what happens during a marathon to someone who's never done one. There's marked fatigue. There's doubt. There's fear. But, it's not all bad. There's joy, ecstasy, and elation to be had as well.

Like many things in life, one of the best ways to prepare for a marathon is to do a dress rehearsal. One of the best ways to accomplish this is to knock out a [half marathon](#) or two. The half marathon distance is daunting and challenging, but it isn't nearly as taxing as the full. So, you can recover more quickly, but at least get a taste of what to expect with the full distance.

Additionally, completing a half marathon or two will provide you with invaluable experience and knowledge about what nutrition product(s) will work for you during the run, how much fluid you should be consuming when you're running, what clothes you're most comfortable running in, etc.

Lastly, if you [run a half marathon](#) and find yourself feeling completely destroyed at the end of the race, that may be a sign that upping the ante and going for 26.2 miles is not the best idea. You may need more time to train.

Can your lifestyle support it?

There are practical matters to consider before embarking on the journey toward 26.2 miles. Training for a 10K or a half marathon is relatively 'lifestyle friendly'. You knock out one or two short maintenance runs during the week and perhaps a longer run on the weekend that lasts 90 minutes or so.

Training for a marathon requires additional time that people don't often consider. Maybe you're accustomed to going out on Friday nights and not having problems knocking out a long run on Saturday mornings. But, when your long runs start to take two to three (or more) hours to complete, chances are your Friday evenings will start to look a bit more sedate.

After a typical long run in preparation for a marathon, you will probably want to spend some time doing self-massage with a foam roller, spend a few minutes soaking your lower body in an ice bath, and maybe taking a nap. Doing all of the aforementioned will likely take a couple hours in addition to the time you logged on the road.

Do you have a demanding job? Do you have a spouse/partner? Do you volunteer on a regular basis? Do you have a life? All of these questions are relevant, as training for a marathon almost inevitably will impact your lifestyle in small and big ways.

Are you currently injured?

This one should be obvious, but surprisingly many people ignore it. If you're currently in pain or suffering from an aggravation or injury, ramping up your training in preparation for running a marathon is ill-advised.

If you're suffering pain that makes walking uncomfortable (let alone running), it's likely time to back off on the running rather than increase your running workload. A long run of two to three hours will almost certainly exacerbate anything that is ailing you.

While mental toughness and the ability to persevere is requisite if you want to run a marathon, using common sense is equally as important if you want to arrive at the starting line healthy. Make sure you are healthy before embarking on your journey.

Does the increased risk of aggravation/injury give you pause?

Again, the marathon is a distance not to be taken lightly. You tend to see more aggravations and injuries associated with training for the marathon than [5Ks](#), 10Ks, or half marathons.

Additionally, the severity of the injuries tends to be more pronounced. Stress fractures, [plantar fasciitis](#), Achilles tendonitis, shin splints, and a host of other issues can arise.

The right training, maintenance of your body, correct running biomechanics and form, proper nutrition/hydration can all help stave off aggravations/injuries. But, even covering all of this doesn't mean you'll be exempt aggravation or injury.

It's often the case that the best marathoners on the planet do nothing but run. They may very well have a team of resources to take care of them. They may not have a day (or night) job. Even these rare individuals fall prey to aggravation and injury sometimes.

One can train for and complete a marathon and circumnavigate aggravations/injuries. But, recognize there is increased risk. If you're struggling to avoid aggravations and injuries for the half marathon, going after 26.2 miles right now might not be the best idea.

If the potential increased risk of aggravation and injury doesn't give you pause, the marathon awaits.

Do you really want this?

The majority of this article has been largely focused on a few key practical things to consider before training for a marathon. All of these items are relevant and should be considered.

The final thing to consider is a bit more personal. In short, do you really want this? Even if the answer to all of the above items is a resolute yes, there are no guarantees.

So, I've addressed some of the risks, but what of the potential rewards? Assuming the stars align and you not only complete your training, but also complete the marathon, you will be a fundamentally changed person. You may discover the marathon is one of the most life affirming experiences you've ever had.

You may find yourself immediately wanting to run another marathon or at least embracing the idea of running as a significant part of your life moving forward. If you ever doubted your status as a runner, those doubts should be dispelled permanently.

The realization that you are now part of a small segment of the population that has run 26.2 miles may make other formerly impossible challenges and goals seem less daunting. The experience of conquering a marathon may wash over into other areas of your life.

Answering the question of whether or not you really want this is ultimately the most important of all the questions I've posed because completing a marathon requires more heart than legs at the end of the day. Make sure your heart is in this journey.

Matt Forsman (AKA Marathon Matt) has been a runner for more than 20 years and a USATF/RRCA certified coach for more than five years. He has worked with thousands of runners in the San Francisco Bay Area through his group training programs that regularly attract 150 to 200 runners per season and a host of individual clients. Matt has contributed to Runner's World, NorCal Running Magazine, and other publications. You can learn more about Matt at www.marathonmatt.com