

Plan for Your Best Year of Running

By Patrick McCrann for Active.com

The new year is upon us and so is the season of giddy goal setting. You know that short window at the end of the year/beginning of the new year, when everyone makes snap resolutions about health, fitness, work, family, diet. Unsurprisingly, the vast majority of these promises fail long before we remember to cancel that gym membership ? but it doesn't have to be this way. You can still set lofty goals for your season and achieve them, but it takes more than a deadline and peer pressure. It takes some quality planning.

5 Simple Planning Mistakes That Runners Make

If you stop to observe your own running history, or that of your friends, you'll probably be able to pick up a few quick points on things "not to do" in advance of a big year. Here are a few that come to mind; your own list might be longer.

1. Too little, too late: Choosing a late-season race that allows you to procrastinate like a professional for so long that by the time the race arrives you have a bigger hill to climb than when you started.
2. Too much, too soon: Picking a lofty goal and putting it so close there's not enough time to train.
3. Last-minute mixing: Adding spontaneous events to your schedule in such a way as to undermine your overall training progression.
4. Goal grabbing: Jumping on the bandwagon of a friend and simply adopting his or her goal.
5. Chasing distance, not fitness: Setting arbitrary targets for long run or training weeks regardless of your fitness. This often leads to great training benchmarks but sub-optimal racing.

Think Big

As you consider your goals over the next few weeks (yes, take more than a day), be sure to pick something that is a stretch goal. This type of goal will keep you focused and engaged when it matters most. Setting a goal such as "just trying to finish," for example, won't get you out the door to hit all your workouts. Odds are you'll still manage to finish the race, it will just take a little longer.

Instead, focus on a real target. Examples include:

- Run a sub-4:30 marathon, or a sub-2:00 half marathon
- Run a faster second half of any race
- Don't walk a single step in the last 10K of your race
- Finish in time to earn that special medal

Pick Your Target

It's easy to get carried away with your goals—I call it Athletic Amnesia. Mere minutes after saying you want to run the fastest marathon of your life, you are proclaiming this will also be the year you swim the English Channel, and finally master speaking Japanese.

Don't get me wrong; lots of goals are great. But know which one is your most important one, and use that as your guide to help set up a year that will enable you to be your best.

Work Backwards

Once you know what your big goal is for the season, work backwards towards race day. The bigger the goal race, the longer you need to plan. As an example, a marathon might take a six-month window of planning, from initial training to building actual race fitness. A 5K, on the other hand, might only take eight weeks of planning.

Back planning also allows you to incrementally build your training and race selection to fit your goal race. Your half-marathon training might benefit from a 10K race a few weeks before the big day. Perhaps there are local tune-up races that would allow you to replace some of the longer, solo training days with friends and some fun.

Here are some additional tips to help you build out your best year.

How to Pick Your "A" Race for the Season

- Location: Keep it close to make it easy, or choose a fun destination race.
- Social: Pick a race that your friends might also do, and train together. Starting to train too early or waiting too long to race could mean you are on your own.
- Weather: Make sure the last eight to 12 weeks before your big race are conducive to training. Your stretch goal should be hard enough without having to deal with blistering heat, tornado season, daylight savings, etc.
- Time it right: Do everyone a favor and make sure the race doesn't conflict with key personal and professional milestones. If you're an accountant, you probably shouldn't pick a late April or early May key race.

Keep It Fun and Fast Until 12 Weeks Out

- Train to be fit, not to race: If you are healthy and fit, you shouldn't need more than twelve weeks to peak for your big race.
- Local race calendar: Sign up for 5K and 10K events to stay focused and build critical speed without pressure.
- Get creative: Find new places to run, even if it means going out of your way. Those last few weeks will force you to do plenty of work when the time comes.
- Draw the line: Have the official start of your race preparation clearly marked so you know when it's time to bring your "A" game.
- Shop ahead: Have the gear and supplies your training requires so you can avoid missed workouts or last-minute shoe shopping issues.
- Remember to rest: Take at least one day off a week, if not for a physical break, then at least for your sanity.
- Set incremental targets: Pick some intermediary milestones to your stretch goal that you can test in a few key training sessions or tune-up races. This could be a specific pace, distance or time.

There is no single right way to plan a season. Make sure you know the big goal on the horizon, and set the small steps in motion early on. This will keep you involved and consistent, and you'll be ready to start the real training when it matters. By the time you arrive at the starting line, you'll be confident knowing that you have given it your best shot all you'll have to do is run.