

Race Day Strategies for Marathoners

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Your marathon preparation occurs over several months. You plan meticulously and train diligently so that you are in peak condition.

To do your best, you also need to have a plan for the marathon itself that anticipates the details—warm up, pacing, first miles, first half, the final six miles and 385 yards.

Having a plan will help you get the most out of your long months of training so that you can finish exhausted but satisfied.

Warming Up

The purpose of a warm-up is to prepare your body to run at race pace. Beginners, whose goal is to finish, can warm up during the first couple of miles of the race. However, if you are a more competitive marathoner, you will attempt to run the marathon faster than your normal training pace and need to find an optimal warm-up that activates your aerobic system while sparing as much glycogen as possible for the race itself.

Plan to warm up with two five-minute runs with some stretching in between. Start warming up about 30 to 40 minutes before the start of the race. Start your first warm up run slowly, and gradually increase your pace so that you finish at about one minute per mile slower than marathon race pace.

Next, stretch for about 10 minutes including your upper body. Follow that with another five minutes of running, this time gradually picking up the pace until you reach marathon pace for the final 30 seconds or so. Then stretch again.

Try to time your warm-up so that you finish no more than 10 minutes before the race starts.

Your Pacing Strategy

Assuming that you have a time goal for the marathon, and have trained accordingly, a pacing strategy will help you achieve your goal.

The basics of marathon physiology indicate that the best strategy for the marathon is relatively even pacing. If you run much faster than your overall race pace for part of the race, then you'll use more glycogen than necessary and will likely start to accumulate lactate.

If you run much slower than your overall race pace for part of the race, then you'll need to make up for this lapse by running faster than the most efficient pace for another portion of the race.

The optimal pacing strategy, then, is to run nearly even splits, taking into account the idiosyncrasies of the course you'll be running.

However, your running economy will tend to decrease slightly during the race, meaning that your lactate threshold pace will decrease slightly as well. The result is that your optimal pace will be slightly slower during the latter stages of the marathon.

A more efficient pacing strategy is to think of the race in two halves, and allow yourself to slow by two percent to three percent during the second half. Although in most cases you should stay with your pacing plan, occasionally the weather or other circumstances may merit slight changes in your strategy.

If you're running into a head wind, there's a substantial advantage to running in a group of runners to block the wind. This may warrant running a little faster or slower than your planned pace. Even on a calm day, you may want to adjust your pace in order to run in a group.

Although drafting behind other runners will give you a small energy advantage, most of the benefit of staying with a group is psychological. You don't have to set the pace, and you can relax and go along with the group.

Most runners find it mentally difficult to run alone for long stretches of the marathon. You can measure the tradeoff between having company and having to compromise your strategy by a simple rule of thumb: If you have to deviate from your goal pace by more than eight to 10 seconds per mile, it will be important to drop away from that pack.

That eight to 10 seconds can be the difference in effort that could put you over the edge. If your breathing is uncomfortable and you can sense that you're working at a higher intensity than you can maintain until the finish, then relax and let the others go. You may find that the group will soon break up and that you'll once again have others to run with.

The First Half

It's easy to get carried away and run the first mile too fast. A better approach is to run the first mile at, or a bit slower than, your goal pace.

Avoid the temptation to head out too fast. Once the first mile is out of the way, settle into a good rhythm. Try to run fast but relaxed. Establishing a relaxed running style early in the race will go a long way toward helping you avoid tightening up so that you can maintain your goal pace to the finish.

It's important to drink right from the start rather than waiting until you're running low on energy or fluid. If you wait until you're tired and light-headed, it will be too late.

Take a carbohydrate drink at the first aid station. The longer you can postpone dehydration and carbohydrate depletion, the longer you will be able to maintain your goal pace.

Mentally, the first half is the time to cruise. Save your mental and emotional energy for the second half of the race. Just try to get the first half behind you at the correct pace without using any more mental energy than necessary.

On to 20 Miles

From the halfway mark to 20 miles is the no man's land of the marathon. You're already fairly tired and still have a long way to go. This is where the mental discipline of training will help you to maintain a strong effort and a positive attitude.

It's easy to let your pace slip. Use your splits to know exactly how you're progressing. Concentrate and maintain your goal pace during these miles. Slowing during this portion of the marathon is often more a matter of not concentrating than of not being able to maintain the pace physically.

Focusing on your splits gives you an immediate goal to concentrate on. If you find yourself flagging, don't try to make up the lost seconds, just focus on your target pace to get back on track. Focusing on these incremental goals along the way prevents a large drift in your pace.

It's not unusual to have a few miles when you just don't feel good. These bad patches are a test of mental resolve. These stretches may last a while and then mysteriously go away. The key is to have the confidence that you'll eventually overcome this bad patch.

The only fuel for your brain is glucose (carbohydrate), and when you become carbohydrate-depleted, the amount of glucose reaching the brain starts to decrease. Taking in carbohydrate as often as possible during the second half of the race can help you maintain your mental focus.

The Final Six Miles and 385 Yards

At mile 20, you've made it to the most rewarding stage of the marathon. Up to this point, every mile required the patience to hold back. Now you're free to see what you've got.

During these final few miles you get to dig down and use up any energy you have left. This is what the marathon is all about. It's the stretch that poorly prepared marathoners fear and well-prepared marathoners relish.

The key from 20 miles to the finish is to push as hard as you can without having disaster strike in the form of a cramp or very tight muscles. You need to use your body's feedback to determine just how hard you can push.

Your legs will probably be on the edge and will limit how fast you can go. You need to test the waters a bit and push to the limit of what your muscles will tolerate. It is a process of taking progressively greater risks as the finish line nears.

You will know you have mastered the marathon if you can give it a little more effort and finish strong.

When Not to Finish

Most of the time you should try to finish even if you have disappointed your expectations. The marathon is a test of endurance. If you casually drop out, it will be easy to drop out again.

However, there are circumstances that are important to recognize when dropping out is the only wise thing to do.

- If you're limping, then your running mechanics are off. You will aggravate your injury by continuing.
- If you have a specific pain that is increasing progressively during the race, then you're doing yourself harm and should stop.
- If you're light-headed and unable to concentrate, you should stop.
- If you're overcome by muscle cramps, a torn muscle, or heat exhaustion, then stop.

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