

5 Tips for a Better 5 Miler by Stride Longley

If, like me, you have a mind that wanders --ooh, a shiny thing!--, you've likely discovered that you have an absolute mileage threshold, after which your attention span shrivels and wilts like so much bacon --mmm bacon-- or spinach, for the bacon-phobes out there. Where was I? Right; attention span.

There's just some race distances where you've got too much time on your feet to get trapped inside your own thoughts, and this can be detrimental to your overall performance. For me, anything over the half-marathon distance lends itself to a meandering mental state in which I become overly concerned with my performance from a step to step basis, and ultimately find myself lost in thought. Adding to my misery, I rarely leave the house with anything less than the newest high-tech speed and distance device and a heart rate monitor, and the data overload can be enough to make a brave man weep (and I'm no brave man).

So my solution, though not universally so, is to consistently tackle the best intermediate race distance out there: the 5-miler. Not quite so grueling as a 10k, nor as short (and sometimes unsatisfying) as a 5k, the tradition of the 5-mile race is one less of pacing and more of gunning it and holding on. There's too little time to really over-think the 5-miler; just as soon as you think you might have to fold, it's time to kick it out for the finish.

Whether you've never attempted the fabled 5-miler, or you're looking to drop 10 minutes on your next race, I've got 5 tips to get you to the finish in form.

- 1) Cover the distance. 5-miler training is unlike half-marathon or marathon training in a couple of key areas. Primarily, many of the physiological demands of running in excess of 10 miles rarely factor into races under that threshold. Typical training regimens for a half or full marathon will have the runner dedicating several weeks or months to building up and tapering back in anticipation of the energy expenditure on race day, never quite hitting the actual distance of the event. During these longer distance events, much of your performance can be dictated by the degree to which you're acclimated to being on your feet for hours at a time.

The 5-miler is a race that benefits strongly from a familiarity with the distance, and so a number of your training runs should actually be 5 miles or longer. Knowing how your body feels at 6, 7, or 8 miles will give you an extra gear to shift into over the shorter race distance and will ultimately help make the final quarter of the race much more sustainable.

- 2) Calorie counting. In longer distance racing, there is also the added complication of glycogen allocation and metabolic efficiency; simply put: how good your engine is at burning calories. In a 5-miler, the calorie expenditure, which can still be considerable, is rarely felt during the course of the event.

Marathon runners often "bonk" at or around 17-18 miles into the race due to depletion of the body's glycogen stores from running at a manageable but typically slower pace, and will sometimes report a sensation of hopeless fatigue. This is combated by taking a steady supply of complex carbohydrates at regular intervals during the race, allowing the body to absorb nutrients and burn fuel at a more even rate.

Contrarily, 5-mile race pace is typically much faster than that of a marathon, and will typically feature quick bursts of pacing that bring the runner into oxygen debt, generating lactic acid and churning through calories at a very rapid rate. As a result, instead of worrying about what's going into your system *during* the race, it's vitally important that you're covered well beforehand. Make sure you've eaten a good balance of complex and simple carbohydrates (starches and sugars) to allow your body to maintain pace

over the duration, yet tap into the richer burning simple sugars during moments of anaerobic exertion.

- 3) Develop a race plan, and nail it. Marathon runners often get pace bands, or Sharpie-tattoo themselves with mile splits in an attempt to plot out and cover the distance at an even pace. But let's face it, whether you're calculating a marathon in miles or kilometers, you're looking at a minimum of 26 intervals (42 for you metric folk), each of which could be an opportunity for a mental meltdown.

With the 5-miler, it actually makes sense to break down the race into intervals. For the distance, I prefer to work in kilometers, and I approach it as such:

0-1k: Starting sequence
1k-2.5k: First 1,500 after settle
2.5k-5k: Middle 2,500
5k-6.5k: Third 1,500
6.5k-7.5k: "Grit it out thousand"
7.5k-8k: Finish

Typically the starting sequence is a high-strung affair, with flailing limbs and spinning legs all around. You will absolutely be in an anaerobic state during the first 400m of the race, from the adrenaline alone. The latter part of the first 1,000m is where you begin to settle down into your race pace.

The first, middle, and third sections after the settle shape the bulk of the race, and should be approached with a relatively even pace. By the end of the third segment, you're over 4-miles deep and looking at less than a mile until the finish.

What I call the "grit it out thousand" is the part of the race where you do everything in your power to hold onto the speed you've built and maintained since the start. Typically this is a tough part in the race, and by thinking of this portion as a tough 1,000m section (instead of in miles), you're likely to be less overwhelmed.

- 4) Finish. Strong. My coach used to say "I can do anything for a minute. Literally, anything. If my life depended on it, I could fly for one minute." When you finish the thousand, you're a little over one lap of a track away from the finish. With so little of the race left, there's no reason not to finish stronger than you started. You kick.

When I enter the last 500m of a race, I take 20 strides to refocus and change gears. I exhale hard, and shift. With a little over 1 minute to go, I remind myself of this adage, and ignore the rest of the world around me. Build speed with each stride, use your arm swing to both increase your cadence and pull you through the stride, and cross the line with purpose. There's never a reason to finish a race giving any less than your all.

- 5) Stretch. Like any good author of a training article, I'm not letting this one go to bed without harping on the merits of stretching. The fact of the matter is, next time you finish a 5-miler, survey the crowd and take note of how many finishers are stretching. Typically, runners make a beeline for the water and food tables, more concerned with eating their well-deserved slice of pizza than with the state of their muscles.

Unfortunately, it is during the first 15 minutes prior to the race that the majority of muscle tension sets in, after which the muscle has cooled and will no longer effectively take stretching. Compounded by the fact most runners have a hunched-over-and-seated driving commute ahead, you're looking at a recipe for all kinds of day-after injuries.

I'm not saying you should skip the food and water; rather, grab and go. Take a couple bottles of water, a few bananas (and a slice if you feel you earned it), head to an area where you can stretch (and eat) in peace. Spend 10 minutes or so stretching, and you will have done yourself a significant favor in the

prevention of post-race injury.

If you give the above tips some sincere consideration, you'll be looking at a stronger, faster, and smarter 5-mile runner in the mirror the next time you race. So, where was I? Right...bacon. Delicious.

Cheers,
Stride