

The Myth of the Marathon Meal

by Stride Longley

I must admit, my writing is significantly better on a full stomach. There's something magical about a well-timed rice and bean burrito from Anna's Taqueria (if you don't know Anna's, you're missing out) with just the right amount of hot sauce that inspires literary greatness in me. One might call it my nutritional muse.

However, that which allows my fingers to effortlessly glide across the keyboard with prophetic vision and ease just so happens to be absolute Kryptonite to my running - something about the rhythmic jostle of an 18-ounce tortilla payload does not make for an effective pursuit of a new PR.

Because chances are quite good that a great many of you are doing some combination of head nodding, salivating, and panicking about the upcoming marathon, I thought it only apropos to dig in, knife and fork, to the matter at hand: what to eat the days before and the day of the Big Race.

Let's begin with an adage I've found particularly applicable to almost all aspects of running and marathon training in general: "If it ain't broke, don't fix it." Simply put, that which has become routine for you over the past 16-20 weeks of training - *waking at strange hours, stretching for what cumulatively amounts to days of your life, swearing off booze (some of you), and yes, running absurd amounts of mileage* - is, whether you can admit it or not, your lifestyle. That will undoubtedly change after the race has finished and you're swilling a victory beverage with a medal round your neck, but for the time being, it's your life.

Because all of these elements are so deeply ingrained in your being, changing any one of them for an expected benefit this late in the game would be akin to waking one morning and deciding you're left-handed: the consequences could be absolutely disastrous (especially for those of you who use power tools for a living). This close to the race, it's best not to throw any curveballs (or any new pitches for that matter) into your training regimen and daily routine.

This also, unsurprisingly, happens to ring true when it comes to dietary concerns. With under two weeks to go, don't suddenly begin a course of protein shakes, Omega-3 fatty acid supplements, baby aspirin, and eat exclusively oysters just because you read an article praising their benefits. Your body is a machine, at least in theory, optimally tuned to the demands of the race ahead, and any variation in the fuel it uses will likely cause digestive confusion at the very least. You wouldn't put Diesel fuel in your gas-burning roadster, would you?

That being said, it's best to stick to the basics. You know which foods work well on your runs and which don't. You've been eating them for the past 4 months, and you've got plenty of experience with how those foods affect your physiology. While I can't prescribe specific foods that will work for each one of you due to individual nutritional and metabolic demands, I can say that what has worked for 16 weeks will continue working on race day.

And now we take on the age-old topic of Carbo Loading. You all know by now that there exists a tradition long hailed in marathon lore of eating a large pasta dinner a night or two before the race in an effort to build up your body's energy stores for the demands of the event. And, while it may sound somewhat hokey, the theory is actually pretty sound. Let's not forget the countless thousands of marathoners that have completed the previous 112 Boston Marathons with nary a caloric catastrophe among them; they must be on the right track.

The fact of the matter is, your liver is the deciding factor in how effective your carbo loading can be. Glycogen, a starch-based polysaccharide, is a sort of secondary energy source stored in the human liver, ready for slow delivery after initial carbohydrate stores are depleted. In short, once the coffee and bagel wear off in the morning, it's your liver that powers you through to lunch. Runners and endurance athletes will sometimes experience a sense of hopeless fatigue called "Bonking." That's what happens when your glycogen stores run dry, and that's why nutritional supplements like Power Bar Gel and Gu exist, to help delay or deny the bonk from occurring at all.

The thing is, your glycogen stores are just like a gas tank: they have an empty, and they have a full. Carbo loading only makes sense to a point, because beyond a certain threshold your liver will no longer effectively be able to absorb the carbohydrates and your body will begin storing the excess calories as fat. While the good news is your body can still readily burn fat, your metabolism is conditioned to burn carbohydrates much more effectively. Long story short, overstuffing yourself with bread and pasta to the point of lethargy is likely to have little to no additional benefit over a more reasonably-sized carb-heavy meal.

And lastly, we broach the topic of the race-day breakfast. Again, your training and experience should dictate what you can and should eat on the morning of the race. Try to avoid foods high in simple sugars (kid's cereals and juice boxes come to mind), and instead focus on foods that will allow your body to deliver energy more evenly over time – bagels, yogurt, bananas, etc. You want your breakfast to carry you comfortably through the first half of the race without weighing you down, so eat smart and eat light.

Beyond that, make sure you're taking in energy supplements you have trained with at regular intervals during the race. Every 45 minutes is a good starting point, but because each runner will metabolize foods at different rates, trust your gut. You want to be taking gels or some other energy supplement often enough that you never feel hungry. If you start to feel a craving, feed it, because often by the time you feel truly hungry it can take the better part of 10-15 minutes before you feel the effect of the supplement.

As always, trust your training. You've made it this far thanks to a combination of calculated effort, trial and error, and a bit of the human will, and at the end of the day, those 16-20 weeks in your back pocket are your key to reaching the finish line happy and healthy.

Now, back to my burrito...

-Stride-

Note: As always, with any major change in diet or exercise habits, it is important to consult a physician prior to making any decisions. The content of this article is for educational purposes only, and neither Marathon Sports nor its affiliates may be held liable for any injury that results from running or the improper use of the information at hand.