

Tips for the Waning Days of Training

by Stride Longley of Marathon Sports

For many runners—especially first time marathoners— the final weeks of marathon training are the most daunting. The mileage is longer, the weather is less predictable, and both physical and mental fatigue begin to take their toll. As a result, it is these final weeks that can make the difference between a successful marathon campaign and an early bow out. The following is a list of common issues that arise during these waning days, and suggestions for coping with them.

I. Injury Prevention

Two of the most common (and often severe) injuries we see in marathon runners—Achilles Tendinitis and Iliotibial Band Syndrome—are potentially the most easily preventable. Most runners, rookie and veteran, don't take stretching as seriously as they need to. By working a simple 10-15 minute stretching regimen in at the end of most runs, these two injuries can be eliminated before they even begin in many cases. Careful and deliberate stretching of the calves, hamstrings, quads, and hip flexors, 20-30 seconds per side, followed by a similar routine for the upper body and core is all the maintenance most runners need to keep the nagging injuries at bay. Take care of your muscles and they will take care of you, all the way to the finish line. For a comprehensive list of stretches valuable to all athletes, we suggest a book titled *Sport Stretch* by Michael J. Alter.

II. Nutrition and Hydration

A. Fuel

As the mileage creeps up over the 16-mile mark during long runs, many runners find that the increased distance isn't as daunting as is maintaining proper nutrient levels. While the individual demands of each runner are going to vary case by case, one thing is certain: you can't get from point A to B without proper fuel.

The best way to ensure you don't fall into glycogen debt (what endurance athletes call "bonking") is to take in a consistent supply of carbohydrate at regular intervals during exercise. Supplements like Gu, Power Bar Gel, Accel Gel and Clif Shots are all specially formulated gels packed with simple and complex carbohydrates designed to help athletes maintain balanced energy levels during training. The weeks leading up to the big race are the best time to experiment with different flavors and brands.

Play around with these supplements: find one that has a taste and consistency that you can make work for you, and begin to integrate it into your training. Furthermore, once you find a supplement that works for you, stick with it until you finish the race; variables are race-killers, and the last thing you want to do is use a supplement on race-day that you've never tried before. Most running specialty retailers will offer an extensive selection of energy supplements across all brands and flavors to suit your needs.

Lastly, your pre-run meal will depend on your individual tolerance, but generally it is suggested that you eat light: half a banana and some yogurt, or maybe half of a bagel. You're looking for complex carbohydrates (a slower, more steady-burning fuel than simple sugars), so skip the kid's cereal and sweetened juices.

B. Hydration

Even on the coldest runs, your body loses a considerable amount of water and electrolytes through sweat. While the individual recipe for proper hydration will vary from person to person, the effects of poorly managed water and electrolyte intake can be even more severe than mismanaged energy supplies. Dehydration can cause a multitude of problems in athletes, ranging from minor cramping to disorientation, heart palpitations and arrhythmia. In light of this, having a ready supply of water and electrolyte supplements (specifically Calcium, Magnesium, Potassium, and Sodium) during your runs is key to avoiding dehydration and its associated effects. Most energy supplements also contain electrolytes, and many sports drinks are configured for optimal replenishment of electrolytes and carbohydrates at the same time, so it can be helpful to carry both water and a sports drink formula with you on your runs.

Companies like Fuel Belt, Amphipod, CamelBak, and Nathan all make convenient and comfortable water carrier solutions for runners. With systems like those offered by Fuel Belt, the runner can carry anywhere from 2-6 bottles of 7-10 oz, giving the runner the freedom to choose how much of their preferred drink to carry with them, and also affording them greater variety. Seek a specialty retailer to explore all the options available for your water carrying and hydration needs.

III. **Fighting Fatigue**

Everyone has bad days, at work and at play. Running is subject to many of the same rules as the rest of our lives, and though many of us view running as an escape from the day-to-day, physical and mental stressors from outside sources can have a profound effect on your running ability. The key is to not misinterpret a bad run (or even a series of bad runs) as an indication of lack of form or fitness.

In many ways, fatigue and stress have a cumulative effect, and the impact of these may be gradual in its appearance. When these effects begin to accumulate, they are often disguised: the inability to run fast, lack of desire to run, etc. Once these effects are felt, it is important not to underestimate the power of rest, as fatigue can lead to consistent poor runs and even susceptibility to colds and other infections.

To combat these effects, in many cases it is advisable to seek alternate forms of exercise than running to maintain interest, and "unplug" from running, as it were. The stationary bicycle, elliptical machine and Stairmaster, and many other forms of cardio cross-training

will help maintain fitness levels while taking some of the burden of running out of the equation, all while stimulating muscle groups often unused during the running stride.

Additionally, rest days are meant as just that: rest. Many runners, especially first time marathoners, are so empowered by their ability to run such long distances that they often run longer than their training schedule suggests, or run on days included as rest days. The accumulation of fatigue from overexertion such as this is one of the primary reasons for runner exhaustion, and is easily avoided by sticking to your prescribed training regimen. If you really feel compelled to be active on a rest day, stretching and core exercise can be a greatly beneficial substitute for unnecessary “junk” mileage.

IV. Footwear Maintenance

Running shoes have a lifespan, just like any other piece of often-used sporting equipment. Moreover, running shoes are subjected to more abuse and hardship than almost any other piece of running equipment used in marathon training.

Typical footwear manufacturers place a lifespan of between 300 and 500 miles on premium running shoes (meaning less expensive makes and models often have even less durability). For the majority of marathon runners hitting between 30-50 miles a week, a good pair of running shoes will only last 10 weeks of serious training, after which the midsole cushioning begins to fail. Variations in body type, surface, and training intensity will have an effect on this figure, but ultimately the days of getting a year or more out of a pair of running shoes are long gone. The last thing you want on race-day is a flat, worn out shoe derailing your progress at mile 17, so make sure to replace your shoes about 3-6 weeks in advance of the race to make sure they are properly broken in.

If you haven't been fit properly for shoes, make sure to visit a running store that performs a foot and biomechanical analysis to make suggestions based on your particular foot type. Furthermore, make sure to have the staff watch you run in the footwear. Improper footwear can in many cases be as bad for your body as old, worn out running shoes, so make sure you have the proper fit.

With diligence, care, and effort on your part to follow your prescribed regimen, and bearing in mind the above tips and suggestions, you should be armed to battle the last few weeks of marathon training like a seasoned veteran.

As with any exercise and dietary program, consult your physician before significantly altering your routines. The above tips and suggestions are to be interpreted as such, and not as guarantees on the part of the author or of Marathon Sports.