

Eleven major marathon mistakes

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It's strange, isn't it? The marathon is clearly the least-forgiving of all popular race distances, and yet runners probably make more mistakes preparing for this event than they do for all other competitions combined.

The majority of runners can prepare for a 5K or 10K without major difficulty, but a variety of problems pop up almost as soon as they begin getting ready for a marathon. These troubles range from feeling tired and performing poorly to being truly overtrained, and they include the possible development of a painful, serious injury which thwarts training or even stops it completely.

Few competitors enter a marathon in optimal physical condition, and many never make it to the starting line because of fatigue, illness or physical breakdown. Those who do manage to hear the starting gun often sabotage their own efforts during the race by doing something really silly.

Marathon challenges

True, part of the problem is the race itself; the marathon presents some unique challenges. First, it's important to complete some very long runs as you prep for a marathon, a practice which isn't necessary for the 10K and 5K. Optimal carbo-loading is essential before a marathon, too, whereas fairly normal eating can get you through the 10K and 5K just fine.

In addition, your muscle-glycogen stores nearly vanish during a marathon, something which doesn't happen in the 10K and 5K (unless you are following a weird, low-carb diet).

You must guzzle sports drink during the marathon, also, but such imbibing is superfluous in the 10K and 5K. If you drink too much water while running a marathon, you might become hyponatremic. On the other hand, if you drink too little you may become dehydrated (the risk of hyponatremia in a 5K or 10K is non-existent, and the chances of dehydration are exceedingly low).

Finally, your efficiency of movement drops during the marathon, making your effort feel much harder; this usually doesn't take place over 5,000 or 10,000 meters. As you can see, the marathon presents a variety of unique obstacles which must be overcome if you want to run your best-possible race.

Avoid the top marathon mistakes

So, what should you do to move through your marathon training program without major mishap? How can you run a PR race on the anointed day? The key is to avoid the 11 most common

marathon mistakes. These goof-ups represent the key reasons why marathoners often end up with disappointments rather than personal records.

Fortunately, you can avoid the mistakes rather readily, and doing so will improve your marathon performances dramatically.

Here are 11 mega-marathon mistakes:

1. Most marathoners don't have the right time goal. In August of last year, I was chatting with a very likable fellow who was training for the Chicago Marathon. When I asked about his goal time, he smiled confidently and said, "I'm shooting for seven minutes per mile." However, further discussion revealed that his current 5-K time was 24:48!

With just six weeks left before Chicago, it was very doubtful that he would be able to run a full marathon at a tempo one minute per mile faster than his best, current 5K!

While this example may seem slightly ridiculous, it's simply the outer edge of a very common phenomenon. Marathon entrants need to realize that if they train correctly their marathon pace will be about 48 seconds per mile slower than current 5-K capability, 32 seconds slower than 10-K pacing, and 16 seconds more lethargic per mile than half-marathon clocking. These shorter races can all be used to set a *proper, realistic* marathon goal speed.

. Most marathon runners fail to fold goal-pace running into their long runs. As incredible as it seems, many marathoners perform their long runs at a specific, slower-than-goal pace and then expect to complete their marathons at a tempo which is about a minute per mile faster! This is a bit like preparing to build a 747 jetliner by fooling around with Lego® blocks!

Endurance and running ability are always speed-specific; being able to run 26 miles in training at eight-minute pace doesn't increase the likelihood that you'll be able to run the marathon distance at seven-minute tempo -- or at any speed faster than eight minutes per mile.

Such non-specific exertion is "magical" training; an athlete is working hard and then hoping that the gods of running will sprinkle magic dust on him/her at the starting line of the race, allowing new talents to blossom.

Far better than a 20-mile run at slower-than-marathon intensity would be a 20-mile effort, *with about 10 of those miles at goal pace*. Such a training session would permit a marathon runner to see if goal pace was actually feasible, would improve efficiency at goal tempo, and would optimize endurance at hoped-for speed. Believe it or not, these are all good things -- and none of them are optimized by long runs at slower-than-goal tempo.

3. Too many marathon runners try to carry out a long run every weekend. After all, they rationalize, the marathon is a very long race, and so isn't it necessary to practice running long on a weekly basis? One problem with this is that most of the long runs are conducted at slower-than-goal pace, so they have little positive effect on marathon readiness (see mistake #2).

The key problem, though, is that long runs cast a shadow over subsequent training, making it difficult to carry out high-quality training on Monday through Saturday (the days in between the standard, Sunday, long run). With a long run every weekend, the leg muscles are always trying to recover from the impacts and abuses of Sunday's effort at the same time they're being asked to carry out Tuesday's high-speed interval workout and Thursday's red-hot hill session. That just doesn't work!

It's small wonder that *weekly* long runs increase the risk of injury for marathon trainees; the muscles are simply never given enough chance to recover from the prolonged exertions of the weekend. A far better strategy would be to carry out the long run every other weekend -- or even every three weeks. This would still allow a marathoner to learn how to run long, and it would permit much higher-quality training during the weeks that don't have a muscle-numbing long run on the prior Sunday.

4. Most marathoners fail to use sports drinks properly during the race. Consuming sports drinks shouldn't be "saved" for late stages of the race, when significant fatigue is beginning to set in. At that point, sports-drink consumption actually has little effect on performance, since the carbohydrate in the beverage must make its way past the stomach, into the small intestine, across the wall of the gastrointestinal tract, and through the blood to the muscles, all of which take a lot of time (in fact, so much time that the runner may be across the finish line before the first drops of carbs actually reach the sinews).

The most-important quaffing of sports drink actually takes place 10 minutes before the race begins, when eight to 10 ounces should be consumed. After that, five to six ounces should be imbibed every two miles or so during the race. Incidentally, one ounce is considered to be a normal, regular swallow of fluid. Don't forget to utilize this sports-drink-intake pattern during your long training runs, too.

5. Most marathon runners mix sports drinks with other things during the race. This is very bad. For example, if you consume a sports drink *and* water during a marathon, you'll end up with a very dilute solution in your gastrointestinal system; this will slow absorption of carbohydrate and leave you short of energy in the late stages of the race.

At the other extreme, if you consume a sports drink *and* gel during the race, you'll end up with a stomach full of molasses, which will empty into your small intestine slowly, retard absorption of carbohydrate, and increase your chances of ultimately developing a massive case of diarrhea. You should consume a sports drink -- and nothing else -- during the race.

It may be comforting to know that sports drinks can ward off dehydration just as effectively as water does, and that the sports drinks will leave you less likely to become hyponatremic.

6. Many marathoners fail to standardize their pre-race meal. On race day, you don't want anything exotic in your stomach. That means no Szechuan chicken, no sushi, no blackened salmon, and nothing that will create even the slightest cries of protest from your gut.

For your pre-marathon breakfast, you should choose only comfort foods -- eat foods that your system can digest easily. It doesn't matter what these foods are (of course, they shouldn't be

laden with fat or grease); it just matters that they add to the carbohydrate stockpiles in your liver, blood and muscles, and that they furnish enough sustenance to fuel your prolonged effort.

Your pre-race meal should also be consumed before your long training runs -- with the same amount of "lead time" you will be using on marathon day.

For example, if your marathon starts at 10 a.m. and you plan to eat at 7 a.m. on race day, make sure you have the identical pre-race breakfast three hours before your long runs during training, too. That way, you'll be sure that you can run the marathon comfortably with the breakfast you've chosen; it will be neither too much nor too little, and it will be so comfortable that you can concentrate completely on the race itself, not on your belly.

7. Too many marathoners try something new on race weekend. Several years ago, a runner I was coaching bought a bottle of medium-chain triglycerides (MCTs) at a marathon expo the day before her race. The salesman told her that the MCTs would enhance endurance, and she reasoned that endurance was a good thing for the marathon and subsequently quaffed much of the bottle's contents during the hours leading up to the race.

As a result, even though she was mentally and physically ready to run a PR, her digestive system wouldn't let her. She felt sluggish, bloated, and unable to run at an intense pace -- except when a Port-a-Potty[®] came into view. The lesson is that the weekend of the marathon isn't a time for experimentation. Meals should be the same, water consumption the same, shoes the same, etc. As mentioned, the marathon is intolerant of even very slight changes in procedure.

8. Marathon runners don't taper properly before the race. It takes about four weeks to recover from a long run of 18 to 20 miles or so. This means, obviously, that no runs of 18 miles or longer should be conducted during the month leading up to a marathon.

Unfortunately, many runners try to squeeze in one -- or even two -- long runs during the four weeks before the big race. The emphasis should actually be placed on recovery, not prolonged running, during the 28 days preceding a marathon. Recovery, of course, isn't consistent with high-volume training. Rather, it's fostered by a gradual reduction in training, i. e., a tapering period. Four-week tapers work well for the marathon, and weekly mileage during these four weeks can be 80 percent, 60 percent, 40 percent, and then 25 percent of usual levels.

9. Too many marathoners emphasize volume of training over quality. Come on, people -- when you get ready for a marathon, you're not training to run across the Sahara Desert. Seventy-mile-plus weeks might be great preparation for a multi-day race in which at least 10 miles must be traversed every day, but the idea in the marathon is to cover 26 miles, in a single dose of running, *as quickly as possible*.

For many runners, a 35-mile week can be far better preparation for the marathon than a 70-mile week, because the former can more effectively foster the completion of *higher-quality* training.

Contrary to popular belief, a 70-mile week isn't necessarily specific preparation for the marathon; after all, one could run seven miles 10 times during the week, and this would not imply better preparation than 35 miles of higher-quality effort.

Once again, it's what happens on the race course that matters, not the big numbers written in a log book. It's more effective to build up to a 20-mile long run, with about 10 miles at goal pace, than it is to accumulate tons of miles at slower-than-goal speed.

10. Too many marathoners forget that fitness is the ultimate predictor of marathon success. If your VO_2 max, lactate threshold, economy, running strength, power and marathon-specific preparations are all in order, you'll have your best-possible race. If you don't work on each of these variables during training, you won't have a great race. Preparing for a marathon is all about optimizing these variables; it's not about pounding away with long runs and then hoping for the best.

11. Some marathoners actually think that *walking* during the race will improve their times. If we suggested to these same people that running more slowly during the event would upgrade their performances, they would laugh in our faces, but somehow they buy the walking concept lock, stock and barrel! No one needs to walk during the marathon; we can all learn to run the entire distance -- our times will not improve if we train to amble slowly during specific portions of the race.