

## *Tips For Running Your Best*

### **WITH A MONTH TO GO BEFORE A MARATHON, YOU ENTER THE MOST CRITICAL PHASE OF TRAINING. HERE IS EVERYTHING YOU NEED TO KNOW**

*by Scott Douglas)*

If you're running a marathon this fall and you're worried about the task ahead, relax. We're here to advise you on what to do a month out, a week away, even the day of. Shoe tips? Check. Hydration strategy? It's here. Taper advice? Got it. And for those of you not running 26.2 this fall, our humble (yet informed) opinion is that you will be soon. So keep these tips where you can find them – they aren't just essential; they're timeless.

#### **ONE MONTH TO GO**

1. Look down. Select the shoes – and the socks – you'll wear in the marathon. The shoes should be relatively lightweight but provide good support, and the socks should be the type you wear in other races. If the shoes aren't your regular training shoes, wear them on at least one 10-mile run at marathon pace. This test run will determine whether you're likely to develop blisters or get sore feet – before it's too late. If the shoes bother you on this run, get yourself another pair.
2. Do a half-marathon. “About a month out is a good time to test your fitness,” says four-time Boston and New York City Marathon champ Bill Rodgers. “Also, a good race can provide a powerful mental lift, and it will give you a little rest period in the few days before and after as you taper and recover from it.” Aim to run the half-marathon slightly faster than your marathon goal pace. If you can't find a race, recruit friends for a long run, and do the last several miles faster than marathon pace.
3. Add speed to your longest long run. “Four weeks out is when I do my longest run,” says 2:13 marathoner Keith Dowling. “I'll run up to 26 miles, with this twist: I do my usual easy long-run pace for most of it, but with eight miles left, I'll work down to six-minute pace and drop the pace every two miles to finish at five-minute pace.” Translated into mortal terms: With eight miles to go, begin running one minute per mile slower than your marathon goal pace. Then speed up every two miles to run the last couple of miles at goal pace or slightly faster. This run will teach you how to up your efforts as you become tired. Combine this with the half-marathon mentioned in Tip 2, doing one with four weeks to go, and the other with three weeks to go. Your local race calendar will probably dictate the order in which you'll run them. But if you have a choice, do the long run four weeks out (for more recovery time) and the half-marathon three weeks before your race.
4. Mimic the course. If at all possible, start doing runs on the same topography as the marathon. For example, go up and down lots of hills if you're running New York City, and get used to several hours of pancake flatness if you're running a course like Chicago.

(A flat course might seem less challenging, but its lack of variation means you'll be using the same muscles the whole race. You need to prepare for this.) If you live in a flat area and are preparing for a hilly marathon, do several runs on a treadmill, and alter the incline throughout. If you don't have access to a treadmill, run on stairways or stadium steps. (Hey, drastic times call for drastic measures.)

5. Drink on the run. "Practice during your remaining long and semi-long runs with the sports drink and energy gels you intend to refuel with during the race," advises Suzanne Girard Eberle, M.S., R.D., a former elite runner and author of *Endurance Sports Nutrition*. "Serious-minded racers and those with finicky stomachs should be using the sports drink that will be available on the race course. And remember that sports drinks do triple duty when compared with water by providing fluid, carbohydrates, and electrolytes, the most important being sodium." Find out how often your marathon will have aid stations, and practice drinking at that rate. If you don't run with fluids place bottles along your training route.
6. Dress the part. "Please don't run the marathon in a cotton T-shirt, even if it's for a wonderful charity," implores Rodgers. "You'll run so much easier in real running clothes, such as those made of Coolmax or nylon, than in a suffocating T-shirt." Once you've picked your marathon outfit, make sure it doesn't irritate your skin. "I normally race in my marathon clothes before the race to feel if they're comfortable," says Sara Wells, the 2003 U.S. National Marathon Champion. "Also wear the getup on at least one semi-long run."
7. Don't get greedy. Training for a marathon isn't like cramming for a test. That is, doing more miles than you're used to in the last few weeks will hurt – not help – your race. "Even if you're felling great, don't up the ante and increase your training." Cautions Rodgers. "This is the time when many runners have been at it for two months or more and are becoming used to a certain level of training. Draw strength from the hard work you've put in." Wells advises, "Have confidence in what you've been doing. From here on out, you're just maintaining your fitness." And get *plenty* of sleep.

## ONE WEEK TO GO

8. Taper. Do no more than 40 percent of your peak weekly mileage, with most of that coming early in the week. Except for your dress rehearsal run (see Tip 11), keep your runs easy. "You should feel like you're storing up energy, both physically and mentally" says Rodgers. If you've done speedwork as part of your buildup, follow an easy run later in the week with some quick 100-meter pickups to remind yourself of how fast and fit you are. On the day before the race, stick with your pre-long-run routine - a day off if that's what you usually do, a two- or three- mile jog if you're a daily runner.
9. Run like a clock. If possible, run at the same time of day as the start of your marathon. This way, your body's rhythms—including the all-important bathroom routine—will be in sync with marathon needs come race day. The more times you can do this, the better, but shoot for at least the last three days before the race.
10. Set two goals. "Review your training and set one goal for a good race day. and another as a backup plan in case it's hot or windy or you're just not feeling great," Rodgers

recommends, “So many things can go wrong in a marathon that you need that secondary goal to stay motivated if things aren’t perfect, which they seldom are.” Your primary goal is the one you’ve been working toward during your buildup: a personal best, qualifying for Boston, breaking five hours, whatever. Your secondary goal should keep you motivated at the 22-mile mark on a bad day: finishing in the top 50 percent, slowing only 10 minutes over the second half, or just reaching the darn finish line.

11. Run a dress rehearsal. Four or five days before the marathon, do a two- or three-mile marathon-pace run in your marathon outfit and shoes. Picture yourself on the course running strong and relaxed. Besides boosting your confidence, this run will provide one last little bit of conditioning and will help you lock in to race pace on marathon day.
- 12 See success. On several nights before going to bed, or first thing in the morning, visualize yourself crossing the finish line as the clock shows a new personal best. Before this year’s Olympic Marathon Trials, where Wells placed seventh, she replayed positive mental images before falling asleep at night. “I knew the course we would be running, and I’d see myself out on it running well,” she says. “There’s a hill in the 25th mile, and I’d say to myself, “Okay, get up that hill, and then run strong to the finish.”
13. Chill out. Reduce the outside- stresses in your life as much as possible the last week, “This is not a good time to get married or divorced,” Rodgers jokes. Try to have work projects under control, politely decline invitations to late nights out, and so on. Most of all, stay off your feet—save museum tours and shopping sprees for after the marathon, and don’t spend four hours the day before the marathon checking out the latest energy gel flavors at the race expo. “Before the Trials,” says Wells, “I went to my brother’s house and just basically hung out?”
14. Carbo-load, don’t fat-load. “During the last three days, concentrate on eating carbohydrate-rich foods, such as pasta, potatoes, bread, fruit and fruit juice, low-fat milk and yogurt, low-fat treats, and sports drinks,” says Suzanne Girard Eberle, “It’s the carbs, after all, not fat or protein, that will fuel you on race day. Girard Eberle says what’s important is increasing the *percentage* of your calories that come from carbs, not simply eating more of everything. (Bummer, we know.) “Since you’ll be tapering and expending fewer calories,” she says. “you don’t have to consume a great deal more food than usual. Rather, make sure your food choices are carbohydrate-rich, not full of fat—for example, spaghetti with red sauce, instead of Alfredo sauce, or a bagel versus a croissant.”
15. Go with what you know. Even if Olympic Marathon bronze medalist Deena Kastor appears on your front porch dispensing advice, don’t try anything radical this week. Stick to your plan and what you’ve practiced during your buildup. For example, if you haven’t done regular speedwork, now isn’t the time to start just because someone told you it will keep your legs “fresh” while you’re tapering. At this point, also ignore any “can’t-miss” diet tricks from friends. “So much of those last few days is mental.” says Wells, “Feel comfortable with what you’re doing rather than trying something new and worrying how it will affect you.’