



Your Best Marathon: It's Not Just About the Miles

Fall is the season for marathons, and it is about this time that I begin to receive plenty of questions about how best to prepare for a marathon or half marathon. Unfortunately for many, the journey is littered with problems of injury, boredom of training, or strained relationships with family and friends.

Many training programs utilized by coaches and athletes primarily focus on accumulating miles and miles of running to “get the body ready” for the 26.2 miles on event day, as well as provide a little confidence that the athlete can, indeed, finish that distance.

This old school approach to preparing for marathons is naïve and a sure path to injury. The truth is that most of these programs are built on traditional marathon approaches employed by elite athletes, then diluted down for the everyday person. Unfortunately this approach does not work for most people. So how should you think about setting up your training program?

Pillars of Training – A Total Training Approach

Preparing for a marathon is about more than running. Your plan should include what I call your *pillars of training*. Your predominant activity in the plan will of course be running, but you also need to integrate a strategy for functional strength, nutrition and recovery.

These four components make up your *running training pillars*. By giving equal focus on all of the pillars you are increasing the likelihood of making positive changes to your fitness, while maintaining health and staying injury free. After all, you don't just put gas in your car without ever having it maintained and expect it to run optimally, do you? Then you shouldn't do that to your body either, especially when in training.

Run Training

When I train recreational athletes the last aspect of training I consider is how many miles they *have to do*. Instead I focus on what their background of running is and what the status is of their current training. I also consider their life schedule (what other stressors and commitments they have in daily life) so that we can integrate running training *into* life, rather than laying it on top.

While a certain amount of longer runs are necessary to prepare the body for the 26.2 miles, the importance of the *long run* is vastly overstated. The ultimate training goals for most runners are to improve both cardiovascular fitness and muscular resilience in order to avoid fatigue and run the marathon without losing form (biomechanics). This is actually relatively easy to do when you combine long runs with more frequent shorter runs.

Any plan that has consistent runs of extended duration (more than two hours) is likely to increase the risk of injury. Unless you are a



natural runner with great biomechanics, the muscular damage can be extensive from a long run. It requires several days of recovery, which many programs do not allow for, and the accumulation of muscle damage often results in injury. As such, many running injuries occur in the last third of the long run or in the immediate days following because fatigue sets in and your form is compromised.

To avoid this, focus on form and consistency with many short to medium length runs at 40 to 70 minutes at a time depending on your level and experience, then complete longer runs only when you can program them in following proper recovery.

Recovery

The effectiveness of your training program is determined by the importance you place on recovery. Recovery is central to your success (assuming you do the training!). In your marathon training you should have at least two days each week that does not place stress on your metabolic system. The type of activity that causes the most stress is monotonous activity, or running the same pace, for extended durations. At least two days each week have to be with limited or no activity, and very easy. These days are critical to allow adaptations to your hard work, as well as rejuvenate and heal your damaged muscles from running.

It is also smart to include *recovery blocks*. These are three to five days of continuous easier days (or complete rest), usually occurring after 10 to 14 days of heavy training. By integrating these into your

plan you will ensure that you maintain consistency, avoid injury and allow for the adaptations that create performance. Remember, it takes courage to recover!

Functional Strength

There is always a discussion around the value of strength work in running, but the debate usually focuses on the traditional strength work that occurs by throwing heavy weights around a gym. Functional strength training bears very little resemblance to that world. There is simply no argument against the value of properly designed functional strength training.

A good program for any level runner or fitness enthusiast should include plenty of work on the core muscles, including the lower back, as well as tremendous focus on hip stability and lateral movement. While most running injuries occur in the lower extremities, the cause is often from an unstable core and hip cradle. Lateral strengthening is critical to provide the stabilization and support for running, which is primarily a linear sport.

Optimal training ensures that all movements and exercises are functional, meaning that they translate into real movements made in life. I tend to utilize a great tool, TRX suspension training (fitnessanywhere.com), for many of my athletes from professional to recreational. I find that the unstable environment and functional exercises are excellent for all levels, and the ability to customize by level is easy. As with any system, completing the exercises correctly is critical and progression is the ultimate key to continued gains.

Nutrition

The final pillar of your running training is nutrition. I am sure no one needs to tell you that eating plenty of fruits and vegetables and avoiding processed foods is optimal for athletic performance, but it is also important to understand the principles and value of fueling for training.

We are often told that sugars are bad, and we should do our best to avoid them. This is certainly true in general life, but the rules change when you train for something. During and following exercise it is critical that you provide your body with the fuel it needs to complete and recover from training. The majority of fuel you utilize during exercise is from carbohydrate (yes, sugar is a form of carbohydrate), and in order to not only fuel the training, but also facilitate recovery from training and limit unnecessary physiological stress, you have to replenish those carbohydrates during and following activity.

Of course it is natural to want to limit your caloric intake during exercise, otherwise it feels like you are wasting all that good effort. Unfortunately that is the worst course of action you can take. Limited carbohydrates during and following activity will only add physiological stress, limit the ability to make fitness gains and negatively affect your food choices later in the day. Ironically, many people I help who are seeking body composition changes need to exercise less and eat more! It sounds crazy, but it is true.

Go Get It

Training for a marathon is a wonderful goal and it can be a really enjoyable and rewarding journey. Just make sure that you take a smart and logical approach to your training, and think outside of the "high-volume and run-only" approach if you really want to make your biggest gains. <<

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