



This one: 1 - Preparing to Train

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Congratulations, you've got a 2019 Virgin Money London Marathon place! Welcome to the journey to 26.2 miles.

I've run London a lot, as well as maybe fifty other marathons, and I'm also a UK Athletics Coach. Hopefully I've got some useful suggestions and recommendations to help you get to the start line, and the finish, in one piece. Roughly weekly, I'll provide pointers that will hopefully be relevant at the time. They're likely to cover the following topics:

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The content is mainly aimed at people who don't have a background in preparing for a medium-term challenge like this, but there should be plenty for experienced runners too.

This first note covers areas to think about before you go out and hit the streets. There's no rush to crank up the mileage in the short term – that would be the equivalent of trying to drive a car a long way without knowing whether it needs repairs or if it has the right fuel. Better to invest time up front thinking about how seriously you want to take things, the approach that will work for you, and also whether your body and lifestyle will handle the volume when it starts to build. Don't be put off, and don't panic! If you can keep things simple and get to the start line intact (physically and mentally) then I guarantee the 2019 London Marathon will be one of the most satisfying things you'll do.



It's simply running

One of the great things about running is that it's a very honest sport. If you put in work, you'll get results. If you do more (without injury, and with some variety), you'll get fitter. If you run further and faster, you'll be able to run further and faster.

So in many ways, it's just about running. One foot in front of the other, repeat. But it's tough to keep things that simple, and to know when to draw the line between working hard and breaking yourself - the temptation for many people is to throw mileage at the problem, which is a fairly brutal approach and not the smartest way to do it.

People make it complicated

There are lots of sources of information about training, especially on the web, but it can be intimidating and confusing. You'll see talk of 16 week plans, 100 mile weeks, and various specific training sessions. There are inconsistencies, and there's a lot of pseudo-scientific jargon used (VO₂max, age grading, lactate threshold etc.) often for things that are just common sense.

Very little of the complexity is helpful at this point in the process, or at all. And if you don't know what it means it then you won't be able to make choices for yourself. Stick to what you can understand, so that you're in control. Some aspects can be out-sourced, but make the big decisions yourself rather than thinking a plan (or for that matter a coach) knows everything.

Give it some thought

There's a saying in the world of ultramarathons that 'it's 90% mental, and the rest is in your head'. That's also true for marathons, not just in terms of handling the big day but in getting through a lump of training without sabotaging your chances of success. The biggest problems tend to be self-inflicted – overtraining, making poor decisions, chasing unrealistic goals, losing the balance between training and the rest of your life. None of those are really about the running or 'training', they're about how you manage yourself and whether you think things through in a sensible manner.

Be realistic

You'll be working with the body you've got, not the one you had five years ago. Don't set targets based on what you did once upon a time, or what a friend managed. Unless you're going to give up everything to become a full-time athlete, you'll prepare in the real world, with work, family, friends, fun, holidays, and all the other distractions and obstacles that will arise. It's always going to be an imperfect compromise. You might also have injuries – either historically, or during the training period. That's just reality, and it's part of the process.

So don't think it's all going to go perfectly, as it probably won't. For now, the only goals worth thinking about are to complete the distance, enjoy the day and also the process of getting there, appreciate the occasion, and raise a bit of money. Get to the start line in one piece and with a smile, and everything else is a bonus.

Know where you are starting from

The training journey is about getting from one place to another, so you need to know your start point. How is your fitness now? If you have a local parkrun, that's a good way to get out for a fairly hard 5k effort, to see how it feels and what the time looks like. Or just use an online map to work out a flat, obstacle-free route over some distance, and give it a go.

No need to be too exact or to empty the tank completely. If you need to walk, walk. If you need to stop short, do so. It doesn't matter, but the better you know what's possible now, the more appropriate you can make your planning and preparation.

You could then use an online predictor¹ to see what it might mean for your marathon time – but I would strongly urge you to avoid getting too attached to this number. It's just a very rough guide to whether it's realistic to think about 6 hours, 4 hours, or whatever. At this point you have no idea how fit you'll be on race day, so it's a fairly worthless exercise to start aiming for a particular time, or to set training paces with any great accuracy. It's easy to generate precise figures, but they are precisely meaningless at this point, and all they add is stress. This is just to give an idea of the number of hours that might ultimately lie ahead of you, so that you can train appropriately and mentally prepare for what might be involved.

Think about your 'training budget'

Being realistic, how much time and effort are you going to be able and willing to put in to your training? There is no one answer, it has to reflect what you're going to do, otherwise you'll fall into the trap of missing workouts, feeling guilty, trying to catch up, injuring yourself, getting frustrated, hating the entire process, and perhaps not being able to toe the line in April. A very common story, and not a great outcome for people who are trying to raise money for a worthwhile cause.

¹ E.g. <https://www.runnersworld.co.uk/health/rws-race-time-predictor> - although it relies on just one method, and there are alternative approaches.

What's happening with work? Family? Have you got holidays planned? How much time are you likely to be able to put into it, and when – is that mornings, evenings, weekends? Do you have a structured week or will you need to be flexible? Are there periods when you won't be able to train? And to be honest, how much do you actually want to do?

Don't worry about what you *should* do. Certainly not what you *must* do. There's no such thing. A marathon is worth a few sacrifices and some hard work, but it's not worth breaking yourself, your motivation, your body, or your relationships. So just think about what you *can* do, what you *want* to do, and what you *will* do.

It's perfectly possible to do a marathon with zero training. If you needed, tomorrow, to cover 26.2 miles in order to reach a loved one, I'm sure you could. Maybe some walking, maybe a little running, but as long as you weren't carrying an injury, you could do it. So let's be clear, if you want to do a marathon then you *can* do one, now.²

Of course, it becomes easier and faster with training (and 'preparation' in a more general sense). But lots of people tell themselves 'I can't do enough training' when there's no such quantity as 'enough'. Just do what you can do, and you want to do, and be content with that.

Technique and kit

Before you start winding up the mileage, it's worth giving yourself the equivalent of an MOT test - particularly in terms of the way you move, and the equipment you use.

How do you run? Are there things about your technique that are out of balance or which cause unnecessary strain? If so, there's a higher chance that when you start increasing the workload, you may develop an injury. So now is the time to give it some thought and maybe some work. Ask a friend to watch you, look at race photos, go to a running club and speak to a coach, and get a sense of how you move. Don't worry about radical changes – that can also lead to injury – but become aware of how your body works when you run, and if there are things to change or strengthen, now is the time.

And in terms of kit, the basics are fine. Reasonable running shoes with a bit of cushioning, a technical running top, a sports bra (for the girls) and maybe nipple tape (for the boys). A stopwatch maybe. That's all, for now at least. You don't need headphones, you don't need a £500 watch or £150 shoes - all of which might be tempting over Christmas or in the sales. Stick to what you need, and don't worry about what people try to sell you or what you see other people using.³ You would spend a fortune if you believed everything that the running industry told you, and to be honest there

² The cutoff time for London is provisionally 1840 - so 8 hours and 40 mins to cover 26.2 miles. That means just under 20 mins per mile, a relatively manageable walking pace.

³ If it helps to know, I've never paid more than £50 for running shoes, I use a £10 watch for most training, and normally race without one. And I've run for England.

are many better uses for that money. Save it for possible physio or massage treatment, pay for an hour with a coach to talk things through, or simply use it to make a headstart on fundraising.

Build your body

Marathon running isn't just about endurance and fitness. Ideally you'd have a body that moves freely and doesn't fall apart when you're tired, so mobility and stability are important. Physios do great business in Feb and Mar with people who've pushed for a couple of months but break at the most important time in their marathon build-up.

Work on your body early, so when the mileage does arrive, you can cope. Focus particularly on stability and control around the hip area, and elasticity and strength in the calves. Stretching, cycling, swimming, yoga, pilates, perhaps some work with moderate weights. I'll come back to the topic soon with more detail. There is no single correct way to do it, and you shouldn't put your faith in people who say there is. But I'd strongly recommend including something other than running. As much as anything, it'll keep variety in your routine, and give you something to do on a foul-weather day.

The importance of recovery

One thing that elite runners do incredibly well is recover. They know that recovering is not the opposite of training – it *is* training, because that's when the body adapts. When you train you damage your body, and you only get fitter through recovery. So, think about how you'll make time for this as the training builds. Are you world-class at taking things easy? Are you good at taking care of yourself? How's your sleep?

Part of this is also down to diet. You don't need to become a monk, but it's good to have an honest view about what you put into your body. You'll probably be working harder than before, so you need the right things coming in – carbohydrate, vitamins etc. Plenty of fruit and veg. Again, more to come on this topic.

Prepare to be your own coach

A training plan doesn't know your body. A coach doesn't know your body. Ultimately it's you who will always know how you're feeling, what feels good and what hurts. Your body is unique to you. So yes, make use of suggestions from me and from other sources, but remember that you know You best.

If you've done a marathon or something similar before, look back at that – what went well, what didn't? And think more broadly, about how you've handled big challenges previously. Do you need a rigid plan? Do you procrastinate? Are you reassured and encouraged by numbers, competition, or encouragement from family? What is your motivation? Do you actually *enjoy* physical exercise? Again, that's all going to be different for different people.

If you're feeling shattered, if you've had a bad day, if you just can't face training that evening, then *you* need to decide what you do, and not the plan that's stuck to the fridge door. Ensure that the plan is your servant, rather than the other way around.

There's a phrase from the poet Mandelstam – 'I am the flower, and the gardener too'. *You* are the thing that is being improved, and it's also *you* who has to do the work. Coaches can make suggestions, training plans can provide a framework, and to some degree you can set up your environment so that you're nudged in the right direction. But ultimately it's not a great idea to outsource responsibility to a coach, a training app, or a mileage-based plan. You have to be the gardener.⁴

A marathon mindset

There will be times for hard work. There are also times to be gentle with yourself. Be patient and trust the process. There may be moments when you react emotionally and make poor choices, when it would be better to pause and think clearly.

Your mindset matters. Discipline, willpower and patience, not just on race day. In fact the race itself is the easy part, the lap of honour. It's the grind through Jan/Feb/Mar that's the challenge.

We're wired to find evidence to support the conclusion we want to reach. So if you want to do a marathon, and think you can, you will. But if you think you can't, you'll only see obstacles. If you don't want to do it, you'll find reasons why it's impossible. Stay positive, trust the training and preparation to get you there in the end. There will be challenges and obstacles. But there will also be successes.

So your mindset needs attention, just like your fitness. Make time (especially at the start of the process) to work on it, and ensure you're approaching the experience with a positive attitude and an acceptance of the work and the challenge.

⁴ That includes treating anything I say with a pinch of salt – I'll offer ideas and suggestions, but feel free to disagree if they don't work for you.



That's it for now – more to come on these topics over the weeks, and the notes will get shorter! As you can see, for something that's 'simply running', there are plenty of other angles as well. And in fact it's those (rather than your running) which are likely to be where you can get things most wrong, or where you can put yourself under unnecessary pressure.

Running will come later, but start with some thinking so that you're approaching it in a way that's right for you and your life. I'll follow up soon with ideas on training plans and how to apply the principles, but for now, ease into it, cultivate good habits, moderate bad ones, and don't worry about the details.

Three points to summarise all of this:

- Take your time. The whole process is a marathon, not a sprint.**
- Be clear about your starting point and consider your 'training budget'.**
- Be prepared to take responsibility and make your own decisions.**