



Previously: Recoveries and injuries

**This one: How to run a race**

Next: Fuel and hydration

**For those who mostly train alone, off road, or in very quiet places, it's useful to understand some of the sensations that come from being in a crowd – because you'll be surrounded by 40,000 other runners when it comes to London, and crowds of far more. And there's a pressure that comes from a ticking clock – I don't mean the race clock, I mean the build-up to the start of the race.**

**Remember, you don't have to race every race – feel completely free to use them as training runs, you'll still build your fitness. But it's worth getting used to the process. If you don't want to take part, you can still familiarise yourself with the environment by going to watch, or (even better) volunteering to help.**

**It's all about rehearsing those experiences so that it feels more like your natural habitat on 28th April. And it's also helpful because you'll understand what race day fever can do to your body and brain.**

**As ever, find out what works for you, and what doesn't. But this should give you something to start with – a ten-point plan for 'How to Run a Race'.**

### **1. Read the instructions.**

Races all have websites, so use them (if nothing else, to enter the type of race that you actually want to do). If they have instructions then read them – the location, the start time, the route, travel, drinks stations etc.

When you're out on the course too, pay attention to what people are telling you – whether that's encouragement, directions, safety instructions, or a cheer at the finish.

### **2. Do the right things the day before**

Rest, food, drink. Run, or don't, depending on how serious the race is for you. A bit of stretching. Check the forecast and plan your travel.

Lay out your kit, choose the right shoes, write your details on the back of your number, and attach it, or your timing chip.

And set your alarm.



### 3. Get there early

In contrast to a training run, the race doesn't wait for you to be ready.

So take off some of the pressure by getting there early – at least 30 minutes before the start, hopefully more. Eat, drink, rest, gently warm up, use the toilet. Leave your bag somewhere. Use the toilet again.



### 4. Wear the right clothes

You don't want to be too cold when you're running, but lots of people wear far too much and carry things they're never going to need. It's a personal choice, and some people feel the cold more than others. But unless it's below about 10C, you'll probably be fine in t-shirt and shorts.

Dress for halfway, not for the start line – if you're not a little chilly at the start, you're probably wearing too much. Maybe get in the habit of checking your kit in a particular way – personally I work from the ground up (shoes, socks, shorts, nipple tape, vest). Not just in terms of carrying needless gadgets, you should also try to strip down what you wear, so that you're giving yourself a few things as possible to worry about.

And double-check that your laces are tied. You don't want to be dealing with that when 40,000 people are stampeding past.

### 5. Warm up

Get your body and brain in the mood for running, ideally by:

- A very gentle trot for 5-10 minutes, perhaps a mile or so, to get the blood flowing and wake up the muscles.
- Some stretches – most importantly hip flexors, chest, calves, glutes.
- Some technique drills – skipping, striding, and reminding yourself of how you want to run today.

Wear warm clothes for this if you want, but once you're up to working temperature, remove them so that you're racing in your race kit.

If you've got there late, and haven't had time for this, then start slowly – there's no value in injuring yourself by starting hard on cold legs.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> In fact, for the marathon itself I recommend not warming up much, because if you do, it increases the chance that you set off too fast. A bit of stretching and mobilisation is fine, but slightly creaky muscles will mean you're likely to take it easy for the first couple of miles. And that's a good thing.

## 6. Start in the right place, at the right pace

The more races you do, the better you'll be at judging where to start. Some events will organise this based on your previous times or your estimated finish, others will leave you to self-organise.

Don't bother pushing to the front. If it's a race where the time really matters, you'll have a timing chip. There's little to gain from starting in the wrong place, and there's a lot to lose – because you'll naturally try to keep up with people, and 90% of them will have started too fast anyway.

If you sprint off at the start (and lots of people do) there's every chance of ruining a run within the first few minutes. Ease into it, let the crowd thin out a little, don't weave around everyone (adding to how far you'll have to run). Once you've settled in, then push on if you feel you're able to.

## 7. Finish in style

Hold onto your running form, wipe the snot off your face, smile for the camera.

A finishing sprint will probably only gain a second or two, and is the time when your technique fails and you've got the highest chance of injuring yourself. And the photos will be dreadful. So don't feel you have to do it – just stay smooth and balanced all the way to the end.



Don't fiddle about with your watch. Stop it well after the line and mentally subtract a few seconds. Or don't wear one. Someone else is doing the timing.

## 8. Be polite

Acknowledge other runners finishing around you – shake hands, say well done, thank them for keeping you going, share a grumble about the hills or the headwind.

And make a point of thanking the marshals, organisers, volunteers, first aid people, or whoever else has helped to make the race safe and enjoyable. They'll have been there very early and have to stay in position until the last finisher is home.

## 9. Recover

Recovery starts at the finish line.

If you can, eat something (protein+carbs, a banana) and get something to drink. Keep moving – walk and gently stretch, perhaps an easy five-minute jog if you can. Remember the 'magic hour' in which to have a decent meal.

Ideally don't hop straight in your car and drive for hours – if you have to travel, take breaks and stretch, hip flexors and calves in particular.

Give yourself an easy day to follow. Not necessarily total rest, but a bit of gentle movement to stay loose and prepare for whatever training is coming up next. Your plan should have factored in some recovery time, but if you feel very tight (or have a slight injury) remember you can always skip or change the next session.

## 10. Learn

Look back on the whole process, not just the running. What felt good, what made you nervous, what mistakes did you make? How did it feel to run with other people, were you able to run your own race? And so, what might you do the same (or differently) next time, or for the marathon itself?

**Whether they are formal events or something like parkrun, you can use races to build helpful habits. You don't need to go to 100% on each one. That isn't the point. Develop routines and rituals, and get to know how you react when you're surrounded by lots of other people – a lot of runners really struggle to handle the London atmosphere if it's their first experience of a big event.**

The three headlines:

- Get used to how it feels to be a part of a race – the preparation, the people, the pressure of the clock**
- Focus on refining your process, don't worry about the outcome**
- Use each occasion as a chance to learn**