



Previously: How to run a race

[This one: Fuel and hydration](#)

Next: Pacing

Last time, I wrote about the importance of practicing for the race environment – the people, the process, the countdown to the start. Building your routine.

For many people, they'll be racing in the next week or two – potentially a half marathon or something similar. And if you're racing too, you'll probably also be thinking about how to fuel yourself and hydrate during the event itself.

In line with what I've said throughout all these notes, I'd advise keeping it simple, making sure nothing is new for the main event, and doing what's right for you (regardless of what others do). Make sure you're in control. I'll give examples of how I approach it, but as with everything, it's personal. So your experience (successes and failures) will be more relevant than whatever I may do.

Know what's available, and think ahead

Last time I spoke about reading the race instructions. Part of that is knowing what's available on the day – are there water stops, what's on them, what about gels, which brand/flavour? What else is there? At London, it's normally Lucozade products, so do you know what they're like? Have you tried them? Do they work for you?

Ask the organiser if you need to know more. But if you're used to having certain things at certain times, then will they be available? And if not, what might you bring from home and how will you carry it?

You should also remember to look at the weather forecast and if it's going to be hot, then be prepared to drink more than you would otherwise. Keep your plans in line with conditions.

Beware the pasta party

Personally, I don't benefit from stuffing myself with pasta the night before a race. The one time I've done it (and this was before a race that started at 5.30am) it didn't go well. Instead, I'll maybe have one extra meal two days before, then on the day before a race, I'll have a big breakfast and lunch, and just a normal sized meal early in the evening. Remember, what goes in must come out, and you really really want to avoid being stuck in toilet queues or having problems mid-race.





I'll eat nothing new, nothing exotic, nothing massively complex or high in fibre. I'll stick to potato, pasta, risotto, something like that. Usain Bolt always liked chicken nuggets – no matter where was, they'd taste the same and he'd know what they'd do to him. You could probably say the same for a cheese and tomato pizza – even if you're on unfamiliar ground, it's going to be safe.

And for race-day morning, a coffee, some orange juice, and some porridge. Maybe a banana for the journey to the race, especially for London where it's a long time between breakfast and the start.

There is *some* evidence that supports a little 'carb-loading', but don't overdo it. And it's not all about the evening before the race, it's the previous couple of days.

At the start line

Unlike in your own training, you may find there are people at the start area offering coffee, sports drinks, gels etc. Maybe they're sponsors. Just because they are there, doesn't mean it's the right thing to do. Just because lots of other people are tucking in, that doesn't mean it's right for you.

Many people eat and drink far more than they would before a normal long run – they get caught up in the race experience and do things just because 'that's what people do' at a race. You'll see people nibbling away on bananas, guzzling energy drinks, downing packets of jelly babies. They wouldn't do that any other time, but they're being affected by race day fever.

Keep calm, eat and drink normally, no more than you need – and don't get distracted. If you need to, write a list of what you'll eat or drink, and when. And stick to it.

During the race

Remember, everything that you take has potential to do harm, as well as to do good. The less you need, the better. And the simpler you can make it, the less you'll need to worry about it, which makes everything easier from a mental perspective too.

Train for that, if you can. Get used to running without being totally dependent on gels, water stops etc. Know what they do to you, if you do take them. And know what happens if you don't take them.

Focus on getting what you need, not what other people say you need. More people cause themselves serious problems by having too much rather than too little – they take a drink from every station, even if it's a cold day, or stagger around with a belt full of energy gels. Remember, you can always get more if you need it, but if you've overdone things then it's too late.

If you finish a little thirsty and hungry, of course that can make you feel tired. But if you drink too much on course, that can cause damage that's far more serious than a little dehydration, and if you've a bouncing stomach full of sugary gels or other food, that's going to be very uncomfortable.

For anything under an hour (unless it's a hot day) you probably won't benefit from taking anything (drink or food) on the course. Just because you're in a race, that doesn't change – by the time it's got into your system, the race will be over. That's slightly different for the marathon, but the same principle applies. Consume what you need, as soon as you need it. But no more than that.

Sports drinks and water

Most sports drinks are basically just water, sugar and salt. Maybe a hint of real fruit, but usually not. If you think that's what might help you, you can make it yourself with some squash and a little sugar or salt – far cheaper, less plastic waste, and you know exactly what's gone into it. Take a bottle to the start, sip a bit as you get yourself ready, and pop it in your bag for later. I'll probably take a 50/50 orange juice/water mix with me. Maybe with a pinch of salt in it.



Many people avoid sports drinks completely during the race. I'm one of them. I stick to water (which I can also throw over me to cool down). Water is water, I know what's in it and that it will not do me harm.

Whatever you drink, aim for frequent small sips – perhaps a mouthful every few miles, rather than one or two big drinks. If you don't want to swallow it, slosh it around your mouth a few times (it'll signal to your body that you've had a drink) and spit it to the side of the course.

Get out of the end of the drinks station before consuming what you've taken – otherwise you risk tripping over other people's bottles or cups. Especially at London, these areas can be a real hazard by the time 20,000+ people have passed through. So pay attention when you are in those areas, and continue before taking a drink, rather than instantly trying to take a sip within the drinks area. However, I'd advise not carrying a bottle around with you any more than you really have to - it won't do much for your running form, and there's water available whenever you need it. If you're determined to carry something all the way, use a waistbelt or hydration pack so that it doesn't bounce around and sits close to your centre of gravity.

Gels and other food

At London, and many other races, energy gels are available. Again, you don't have to use them – and I rarely do. Many need to be taken with water, but some don't. It's a nasty surprise if you get the wrong one, and there's potential for it to sit in your mouth or stomach and make you feel sick.

So find out which ones are on the course, and when you can get them. On the pack they might say something like 'every 15 minutes' - that's a lot of gels during a marathon, and I wouldn't recommend it.

There are other options. You can get jelly blocks, which have (I think) a more palatable flavour and which you can slowly chew or stick in a cheek, like a hamster, for a mile or two. So I occasionally use Shot Bloks – for a marathon, maybe a pack of six. They're light, I know how they taste, they don't need water, and I can spit them out if necessary. Even then, I know it's mostly a placebo effect – they trick my brain into thinking there's energy flowing into my body.



However, if you're going to be out there for maybe five hours or more, also consider something more substantial – some kind of cereal bar perhaps, or maybe a banana from a station on the course. You wouldn't spend five hours of any day without something that resembles real food. To live off energy gels for that length of time is high risk, unless you've found a flavour and format that you know you can stomach. If you need to slow down or walk to eat something solid, then do that – it's well worth the time.

Risk vs reward

Remember, as long as they are running at a 'fat-burning' intensity, virtually all runners have enough fat stores on their body already to complete multiple marathons. Any additional calories you consume in the form of gels will have only a marginal effect, and if you get it wrong, it could ruin your race. Better to carefully control your pace, so that you aren't needing to go too deep into your reserves, too early.

Stick to what you know, and be cautious - all that training can be thrown away because of bad decisions on the day.



And if things do start feeling bad, then deal with it. There are toilets on the route and for the sake of a minute on your time, you should use them if necessary. You don't want the photos of your big day in London to look like either of these two (which I've kept as small as possible – but you're welcome to zoom in for a closer look!). This is not the look you are going for.



At the finish

As I'm sure I've said before, recovery starts at the finish line. If there's a goody bag with food and drink in it, eat whatever's there as quickly as you can. Grab a banana, a salty snack, or a piece of cake.

And remember the 'magic hour' – find yourself a decent meal with a mix of protein and carbs, so that your body starts repairing and recovering as quickly as possible.

I can't recommend a particular combination of sports drinks and gels, largely because I don't feel much benefit from them myself, and I view them as a risk as much as a help. I'll often race with nothing, or perhaps just some water.

There are many people offering all sorts of magic potions – caffeine gels, beetroot extract, isotonic drinks etc. And you'll certainly find lots of options at the London Expo. If any of that works for you then great, use it. But don't over-use it, and don't try it for the first time on race day. If there's a combination that helps you, find that out in training, and ideally practise using what you know will be available on the big day (either from the organisers or from home).

The main thing is to eat and drink what your body is telling you it requires, and to adapt to the conditions on the day.

The three points for this time:

- Think about it in advance – know what's available, take what you need**
- Keep it as simple and predictable as you can**
- Just because it's there, you don't need to take it. Ignore everyone else, stick to what works for you.**