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Lots of runners attach themselves to particular target times for the marathon, not always for valid or helpful reasons. Some base it on what they ran years ago. Some want to beat what a friend achieved. Others like the sound of finishing under a particular number (sub-5 hours, sub-4 hours, whatever).

Not all targets are useful, but having a rough idea of how long it will take is good. It helps you think about pacing (physically and mentally) and for planning nutrition and hydration. But it needs to be based on your current reality, the body you have now. With about five weeks to go, there's not much room to get significantly fitter, so ideally you'd test your fitness in the next week or so, maybe a half-marathon or slightly longer. And then you can use the info to plan your pacing.¹

There are a few ways to do this. Some are based on a rough rule of thumb² but the easiest way is to plug your time into an online predictor such as this:

<https://runbundle.com/tools/race-predictors/general-race-predictors>

Adjust for reality

If you ran your 'test' in foul weather, you made a mistake which you know cost time, or you had plenty in the tank at the finish, feel free to input a slightly different figure from your actual time - take off a minute or two, if you think that's fair.



However, remember that this only works if the marathon weather is good, if you avoid making the same mistake, and if you max out the marathon. You might even need to adjust the other way if your test has been 'too perfect'.

If you've run a hard 20 miler, that gives a reasonable assessment of what may be possible for a marathon. A half marathon is good too. But there's even more error in there if you're trying to translate from 5k to 42k so treat any numbers based on shorter events with even more caution.

¹ I'm very carefully talking about pacing rather than setting targets. Obsessing about finishing times is one of the most problematic aspects of the marathon, especially for people doing it for the first time. It creates a whole world of expectations, pressures and temptations, none of which are particularly helpful.

² For example, 2 x half-marathon time + 10%. So a 1h40 (100 min) half marathon would equate to a 3h 40 (220 min) marathon.

A lot of assumptions

The estimates assume you will be just as prepared for a marathon as you were for the shorter distance, and that may or may not be the case. For example, if you haven't been able to do many long runs then your endurance will not be as well developed and your race management may also have some shortcomings, so even if you can produce a fast 5k, don't expect your marathon to be in line with what's shown. It works the other way too. If you've got fantastic endurance but no speed, then a 5k time might not do justice to your potential for the full distance. So again, make any adjustments that you think are valid.

A range of predictions

There are a range of predictions (depending if you use VO₂, age-grading, Riegel, or some other method). If nothing else, this should tell you that there is no solid science on this – specific-looking times are generated, but it's better to think of them as a range rather than one scientifically solid number.³

It does roughly work. When I've been racing marathons rather than trotting around, my times do fall within the range of predictions. But only roughly. The models are perhaps all biased towards being optimistic, so especially if you haven't run a marathon before, give yourself some slack and don't get greedy.

If anyone (or any website) tells you that there's one particular pace or time which is right for you, don't believe them. You have to think it through, and also be prepared to adjust on the day. If I was to offer advice, it's that the slowest of the predictions is probably the one you treat most seriously, and even that may be too fast. So work it out for yourself, being honest about what you've done and what you want.

Use it in your long run

Once you have an idea of an appropriate pace, practise it so you have the best chance to lock into it based on feel and perceived effort.

For example, try to start a long run at just under your target pace, just to get familiar with how that feels on fresh legs. Then take it easy for a few miles. And later in the run, come back to marathon pace for a few intervals. This is to help you know how it feels when you're a little fatigued.

³ Two other things to read if you want to question the precision of the models. A 2016 Slate article (http://www.slate.com/articles/sports/sports_nut/2016/11/calculate_your_marathon_time_with_this_calculator.html) and something more recent from the Guardian (<https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/the-running-blog/2018/feb/15/an-updated-formula-for-marathon-running-success>).

You can also use it for any tempo or threshold sessions in the last few weeks. Familiarisation is the aim rather than fitness gains. Challenge yourself to run at your goal pace without looking at your watch.

Use it at the start

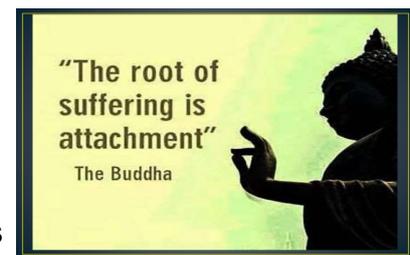
The value of a target pace is not in the last few miles of the marathon – at that point, you’ll know how many miles are left and you’ll be doing whatever you can. Knowing your target splits won’t help you run any faster in the last mile.



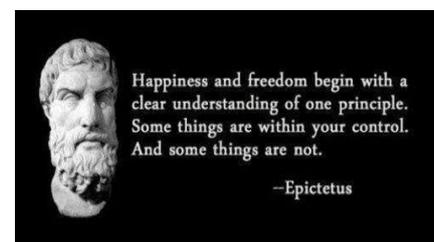
But during the early miles, use the figure as a *fastest* speed at which to run, a ceiling rather than a floor. For example, if your plan is ‘10 minute miles’ all the way, then don’t run mile one faster than 10 minutes. And try to stay just outside it for the first five miles (50-53 mins), maybe even for the first half (132-138 mins).⁴

Avoid attachment

In Buddhist philosophy, the Second Noble Truth states that the root of suffering lies in attachment. I don’t know if the Buddha was a runner, but he was spot on. If you define success or failure based on what the clock happens to say when you cross the line, you’re making all the work of the last few months be determined (as triumph or disaster) by one moment. So especially if this is your first marathon, be cautious about locking onto any numbers and attaching yourself too tightly. It’s entirely possible that something happens on race day which means this is no longer the right figure. Weather or crowds, for example. At that point, you need to step away from (or adjust) the target time – if you force yourself to hit splits into a headwind, or sprint to catch up after a toilet stop, you’ll suffer later.



I can also offer the wisdom of Epictetus⁵ - for him, happiness came from a focus on the things we can control, and not the things we can’t. ‘Control the controllables’ and deal with the rest in the best way you can.



⁴ There’s a marginal difference for London, where the opening miles are downhill. But still, I’d say it’s a mistake to go faster than your goal pace. In a later note I’ll talk about the London route in a bit more detail. Another side note here is a reminder that you’ve always got run/walk options. For example, you could intend to hit 5 miles in 51 mins by a) running it all at around 10 min 10s pace, or b) running 4 miles at 9 mins and 1 mile walking at 15 mins. Either’s totally fine.

⁵ A C1-2 Stoic philosopher.

On race day itself, if you find yourself drifting away from the time you had in your head – don't panic, don't beat yourself up because things are going wrong.

Keep doing what you can do, you're still running the London Marathon and you can still be the best you can be that day.

Everyone who gets to the finish has had a successful day.

You don't *need* a target

You should also feel absolutely free to run with no target time in mind whatsoever. And in fact, that may be how to get the best out of the London Marathon. You still need to stop yourself getting carried away at the start, of course. So maybe a 'first mile' or 'first 5k' number can help. But after that, soak up the atmosphere, look around, smile, suck up the experience, and enjoy it.

Probably my most enjoyable London Marathon came this way – I'd run a marathon the week before and set off without a watch. It was a liberating experience to get away from the dictatorship of the clock, and one that I'd recommend. NB you don't need to run a marathon the week before, in order to take this approach.

Some ideas of finishing time ranges *can* help, and at this stage, you can use relevant evidence of your actual fitness. Do the sums, make adjustments, and start to understand roughly what sort of pace-per-mile could be sensible. Don't sweat about individual seconds, and don't suddenly lock onto breaking a particular barrier. The length of an hour is just historical accident, and if, for example, your finishing time begins with a 6 not a 5, or a 4 not a 3, that's fine.

The three points to summarise:

- To think about your possible pace, use relevant and recent evidence**
- Become familiar with that speed, when you're fresh and when you're not**
- Treat it as a guide to pacing rather than a make-or-break target time**