



Previously: Last long run

This one: The taper

Next: Mental exercise

After your last long run, it's time to taper. And that period (for most runners, the last three weeks) is about ensuring that you're as close to 100% as possible when it comes to race day.

The last few months may have been tough, heading out in foul weather trying to get fitter. Well the fitness is now in place. There's little you can do now to increase it, and if you try too hard to find that extra fraction (or try to catch up on anything you 'missed') you might put your marathon at risk.

This tricky balance is what makes the taper one of the hardest parts of marathon prep, because it's a one-way bet. Put simply, you can't get faster now, but there are lots of ways you could make yourself slower, or even ruin your chance of being on the start line.

So here are a few thoughts on how to get through it in one piece.

Why taper?

Everyone has probably picked up some fatigue or niggles (mental or physical). By reducing the pressure for a period before the marathon, it's a chance for energy to return and any pains to subside. Also, our bodies take roughly three weeks to adjust to a big change in activity. That's why the first few weeks of marathon training are tough, and it's also why there's now only a limited fitness gain that could be found, even if you trained incredibly hard through the taper period. Your body simply can't adapt and benefit.

To do that hard training, you'd increase the probability of not being able to run. Let's say you had a 5% chance of making yourself 1% fitter. You might also have a 5% chance of making yourself 100% unable to participate on marathon day. Earlier in the training period, there's time to recover, but not now.

The hardest work is done

You've probably done 90% of the physical work now. Another 5% is the marathon itself, and the final 5% is the recovery. (I'm making up the proportions but you'll get the point). You've achieved a huge amount if you've made it to this stage in one piece, because from here on, it's really about just delivering a marathon without making mistakes.

However, the mental side becomes more important. Do you have confidence in your body and your training? Can you trust the taper process? Will you be tempted to do something stupid, to try to find a tiny edge?

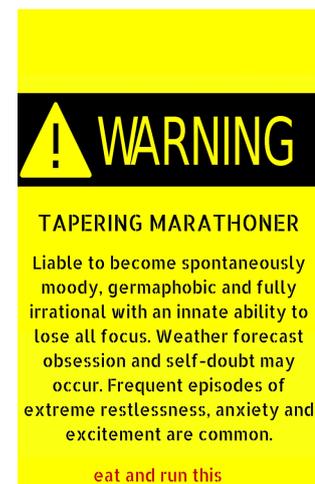
Early in these notes I wrote about the idea of each training session being a small stone, and gradually building a big pile over the months. Well that pile is now high. You can't add much to the top – and if you keep trying to, there's a risk the whole thing collapses.

Taper tantrums

Therefore, many people find this tough. Your body and brain are used to training, and it's hopefully become a habit. So it's a time when lots of questions can arise:

- Surely I should be still running hard?
- What will I do with all the time and energy?
- What (and how much) should I eat/drink?
- Am I getting less fit?
- Why am I not out training? I'll just do one more hard session... or try to sneak in a 5k PB.

It's easy to become irritable or irrational, and to make bad decisions. Do your best to stay calm and active, and find productive things to do.



Keep running

It's a 'taper' not a 'stop'. You may not significantly improve fitness now, but you do want to maintain what you've got.

Aim for a gradual reduction in total workload, not a sudden halt. You might want to substitute sessions – maybe include more walking or cycling, where you can get some cardio exercise without the impact of running. But keep running too.



Maintain quality, reduce quantity

Keep doing some intervals, strides and speed work. If you've been working with training zones, make sure you're still including some work in the higher gears, yellow and red. If nothing else, by continuing to have a feel for 'fast' running, it'll make your marathon pace feel easier for longer.

Don't worry about trying to hit a particular number of miles. Take off your watch. The aim is really to tick over, to ensure that you don't lose any of the sensations of 'how to

run'. Part of that is to still concentrate on your running form now, especially as you don't have time or distance pressure. Stay tall, light and smooth.

If you want to just get out the door for a half hour just for pleasure, do so – but don't then get tempted to push hard towards the end. If it's an easy run, make sure it's easy. If it's meant to be harder then fine, but keep things under control.

Rough numbers

I don't know what kind of mileage people have been doing, and exactly how they've structured their weeks, so I can't prescribe anything specific here. But if your final big week was 'M-3' (which for London 2019 means the week starting 1st April), then use that as a '100%' figure, and roughly base your workload for taper weeks on that:

- M-3 (1st Apr) 100%
- M-2 (8th Apr) 60%
- M-1 (15th Apr) 40%
- M-0 (22nd Apr) 20%

Nothing rigid or scientific about those %ages, they're just an indication. As I've said many times, mileage isn't the ideal way to measure your work, especially if you're including crosstraining (as you should be). But let's say M-3 had been a 50 mile week, then M-2 could be c30 miles, and M-1 could be 20. In 'M-0' (marathon week) you might still go out for a couple of easy runs or some strides, perhaps 10 miles, but at that point it's virtually all psychological (just a way of releasing a bit of tension).

Choose where and when

If you're lucky enough to have options, try to run without any unnecessary risks. Stick to quiet, well-lit tarmac or obstacle-free trails, and (if you can) run in dry daylight, avoiding the time of dog-walkers and the school run. Hopefully this all becomes easier as the days become longer.

Risks can include drains, kerbs, dogs jumping out, tree-roots, slippery corners, children on scooters, parents parking like morons etc. So if you do run on dark, uneven surfaces, stay alert and control your speed so you have time to spot danger and take avoiding action.¹



¹ Seriously, avoid dogs. I lost my most important week of prep for a marathon to a dog-related injury. Other dog incidents for people I know have resulted in a broken kneecap and a broken shoulder.

Maintain good habits, restrict bad ones

Just because you're not doing as much running, that doesn't mean you forget everything else. In fact, it's probably even more important now. Think about your core and glute strength, your form and your mobility. Keep stretching.

Stay on top of your diet. You're doing less work, so you might need to eat a little less – but still make sure it's good, recognisable, natural food.

Whatever you've given up or cut down, now is not the time to rediscover it. Bad food choices, dubious drinking behaviour, poor posture. Stay in control for another few weeks, because if you go back to those now, you're throwing away some of your hard work.

Nothing new towards race day

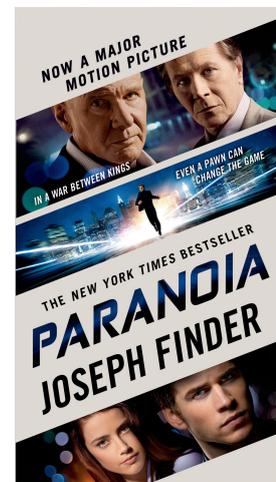
Now is not the time to start cutting down trees, a new DIY project, kickboxing. It's incredible how many marathoners start redecorating during the taper period – in theory that's fine as they have some more available time, but it's not great when you fall off a ladder, trap a nerve in your shoulder, drop a cupboard on your toes, etc.

Avoid risks

Continuing on this slightly alarmist theme, there are other 'risks' to be aware of. Mostly involving other people, and not just when you're running.

If you have to commute, don't sit next to the person with the cough. Beware of children and their tendency to collect every germ that is circulating. Wash your hands more than normal.

There's a word for this pre-marathon condition – 'maranoia'. The sense that as race-day approaches, everyone and everything is trying to sabotage your big day.... It's a known condition, so if it's any comfort, you're not the only one going through it.



Niggles and sniffles

Despite all these attempts at evasive action, it's entirely possible that during the taper period, a problem might develop. To some degree it may be a trick of the mind, making you think there's a problem, making you panic. But sometimes it's real.

Your body has hopefully become used to regular training, and now some of that has decreased. So it may not feel great – you might put on a touch of weight, you might feel slightly creaky in the mornings. It's OK, trust the taper.

And your immune system has been working hard for a few months now – so when you just relax the effort a little, your immune system is likely to also relax, and you may pick up a cold. Again, trust the taper, and trust your body's ability to repair itself. See a doctor if you need to. If it does turn out to be real (rather than imaginary), there is still every chance that you will be able to complete the marathon. Perhaps any target times might need recalibration, based on how you ultimately feel on race day. But that's fine.

Use your time well

And if you do find yourself with more time, there are some beneficial things to do with it. One is to spend time with the friends and family you've ignored for the last few months. For once, weekends can be spent doing a little of what they want to do (rather than being structured around your long run). Obviously spending two days in the pub isn't ideal, and if your family wants to go bungee-jumping you should probably say no. But give something back to the people who've tolerated you.

You can also look back through these various notes, to see if there are any points that you've found helpful. Or if there's anything else that you've worked out for yourself, which is even better.

And another very productive use of your time is to put some effort into charity fundraising. You'll have stories about all the work you've done, how hard the training felt, and how excited, nervous, or terrified you are about the race. All of those will be really effective at making it clear that the hard thing about the marathon is not just one day in April – the challenge is being able to get through the entire process, from the dark evenings of January through to now.

So, take it easy, but not too easy. Take responsibility for the choices you make during the taper period – another few weeks where you should stay focused. I included a line from the poet Mandelstam in one of the first of these notes, to the effect that you have to be both the 'garden' and the 'gardener'. So it's up to you to stop the weeds growing in the last few weeks.



To repeat, the taper is not the time when you get faster. It's the time when you ensure that on race day, you can get close to 100% of your potential. Whatever mistakes or problems have happened, and whatever training you missed, this is not the time to try to catch up. That's gone. What matters is what you do from here, to the start of the marathon (and beyond).

The quick headlines for this one:

- It's a taper, not a stop**
- Minimise risks and maintain good habits**
- Trust the process, trust your body**