



**This one: 1 - preparing to train**

Next: 2 - plans and planning

**Congratulations, you've got a 2020 Virgin Money London Marathon place, and welcome to the journey to 26.2 miles, something which will hopefully be incredibly rewarding for you personally while also raising a big pile of £££!**

**I've run London a lot as well as perhaps fifty other marathons, and I'm also a UK Athletics Coach with a particular focus on endurance. Hopefully I'll have 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 be relevant at the time, and they'll cover the following topics:**

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| <b>2. Plans and planning</b>      | <b>12. Pacing</b>             |
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**The content is mainly aimed at people without a big background in medium-term challenges like this, but there's 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 you want to approach things, and also whether your body and life-style will handle the volume when it builds.**

**Don't be put off, and don't panic! If you keep things simple and get to the start line intact (physically and mentally) then the 2020 Virgin Money 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 relevant 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 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 brightest 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 (VO2max, age grading, lactate threshold etc.). Some of it is meaningful, much of it is not.

Very little of that complexity is going to help at this point in the process, 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 outsourced, 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 ultramarathon world that 'it's 90% mental, and the rest is in your head'. That's true for marathons too, not just in terms of handling the big day but in getting through a lump of training without sabotaging your chance of success. The biggest problems are self-inflicted – overtraining, poor decisions, chasing unrealistic goals, losing balance between training and the rest of your life. None of those are really about running or 'training' as such, they're about how you manage yourself.

## **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, 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's 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 predictor<sup>1</sup> to see what it might mean for your marathon time but I would very strongly urge you to avoid getting 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 specific time, or to set training paces with any great accuracy. It's easy to generate precise figures, but they are precisely meaningless, and all they add is stress. The value in 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.

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 – morning, evening, weekend? Do you have a structured life or do you need to be flexible? Are there periods when you won't be able to train? And 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.

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

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.<sup>2</sup>

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

## Technique and kit

Before you start winding up the mileage, it's also worth giving yourself the equivalent of an MOT test, 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 big chance that when you start increasing the workload, you may develop an injury. So now's 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. Don't worry about radical changes – those 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.<sup>3</sup> You'd spend a fortune if you believed everything that the running industry told you, and there are better uses for that money. Save it for possible physio or massage treatment, pay for time with a coach to talk things through, or simply 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 critical time in their marathon build-up. Work on your body early, so when the mileage does arrive, you cope. Focus on stability and control around the hip area, and elasticity and strength in the calves. Stretching, cycling, swimming, yoga, pilates, perhaps work with moderate weights. I'll come back to the topic soon with more detail. There is no single correct way and you

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<sup>2</sup> The cutoff time for London is provisionally 1900 - 9 hours to cover 26.2 miles. That means over 20 mins per mile, a relatively manageable walking pace.

<sup>3</sup> 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.

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 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 helps 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, 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 life. 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? Think more broadly, about how you've handled big challenges previously. Do you need a rigid plan? Do you procrastinate? Are you reassured or stressed by numbers and competition? What's 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. 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.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> 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.

## **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 supports 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.

**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.**