



Previously: preparing to train
This one: plans and planning
Next: strength and mobility

The previous note covered some topics to consider before a major training block. This is #2, with some principles to guide your training over the coming months. It's not a 'plan' as such, but it covers the ideas *behind* a plan, so you can put something together (or adapt a generic version) so it works for you.

There's no magic

Endurance training is based on the steady and consistent accumulation of fitness. There's no single week or workout which is going to create a sudden transformation. Perhaps think of building a heap of stones – each session successfully done adds another pebble to the pile, and slowly, stone-by-stone, the pile gets bigger.



But if you ruin yourself attempting a super-session or a monstrous week (carrying a giant boulder) you might knock out the next day or week, perhaps the race itself. The pile will collapse. So focus on staying healthy, avoiding injury, and being consistent. Trust the training, give your body the chance to adapt, and fitness will come.

Keep it simple

If you start looking in books or on the web, there are lots of coaches, lots of advice, and lots of plans. Often there's an emphasis on how fast that coach was when they ran, but that's no guarantee of anything. It may be that they're just describing their own training, which is irrelevant for you - maybe they trained full time and it all came naturally, which could mean they can't empathise with those in a different position.

You'll also find language that appears complicated. Plans can be stated in pseudo-scientific jargon or with very precise requirements in terms of distance or speed. Occasionally this is just a veneer to make the coach appear an expert, and that precision isn't actually worthwhile. But whatever the reason, if you don't understand, it removes your ability to make decisions and adapt what's there.

So don't be intimidated, don't look for a name, don't be put off by the language, and don't think there's a single perfect answer. Most plans are more right than wrong, but none have a monopoly on wisdom. Keep it as simple as possible so that at all points you understand what you're doing. There's absolutely nothing wrong with a clear plan in clear language, because that puts *you* in control.

A fixed plan?

Some runners like a rigid plan from the very start, laying out day by day what they 'must' do. 16 weeks, 12 weeks, whatever. I understand the reasoning – there's no need to think, just blind faith that 'if I follow the plan I will succeed'. And it gives a clear series of steps that can be ticked off, often in terms of a mileage number for the week or session.



If that's an approach that works for you then fine. There are solid generic plans out there, on the London Marathon website¹ and elsewhere. They're adequate and if you do most of what they say, and avoid injury, then you'll be fine. In terms of the fitness side of things at least.

However, for me as both coach and runner, this isn't an ideal approach, because there's more to a successful marathon than 'training'. It's a broader process of 'preparation', and if you just tick off training sessions then you could still miss out on some important aspects.

Suggestions not instructions

Don't fall into the trap of becoming a slave to the plan. It's a rough template - you've always got to decide whether that really is the thing to do on a particular day. It's a menu of potential options, not a precise recipe. Marathon preparation is littered with stories of people who become fixated on ticking off every session in a plan. For whatever reason (injury, illness, work, family, holiday) they miss sessions and try to catch up. They feel miserable, stressed, guilty, or frustrated. They lose any enjoyment of the process. And they break themselves before even reaching the start line.

So always remember that you own the plan, not the other way around.

No guarantees

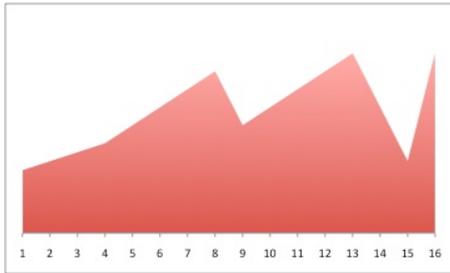
If you did complete every single session in a four-month plan, that is no guarantee of the race going well. Equally, if you miss or change a lot of the sessions, that is no guarantee of the race going badly. It doesn't work like that. The purpose of a plan is just to ensure that you're building up the workload in a sensible way, you're prioritising certain sessions, and you're including a range of training and preparation. If you do something that's more-or-less in line with the plan, that's good enough, just as long as you also work on things like race-day management.

¹ See <https://www.virginmoneylondonmarathon.com/en-gb/trainingplans/> and also <https://www.brightonmarathonweekend.co.uk/marathon-training-plans/> .

Overall principles

Some guidelines for the overall shape of your training, which most generic plans will use:

- Build it up gradually
- Include easier periods after hard ones (e.g. hard week then easy week, hard day then easy day)
- Leave space to recover before the race



This graph hopefully gives an idea – it shows how the workload² might evolve over a c16-week period. You'll see two 'peaks' in there (ahead of the final spike, which is the race). The second is a bit bigger than the first, and there's a dip in between. Based on London timings, this would roughly mean building to a heavy week at the start of March, then back off before a slightly harder week in late March/early April.

If it helps, think of a two-humped camel, the Bactrian kind. If those timings won't work for you (because of holidays, work, life) then maybe just build up towards a single hump towards the end of March (a Dromedary?). But do ensure there's a bit of an easing off before the marathon itself, especially if this is your first marathon or if you've been finding the training very tough. I'll talk more about that 'taper' in due course.



Some thoughts on mileage

It's probably going to help if you gradually do more work, there's no hiding from that. The marathon is an endurance event. One way (and *only* one way) to measure that build-up is in terms of distance, which means your total mileage each week is likely to go up. You'll meet people who obsess about hitting 40 miles, 50 miles, 60 miles for the week, maybe more. However, a precise number isn't meaningful (especially if you're mixing up your sessions and including trail running). Measuring your mileage *can* be interesting as a backward-looking check to ensure you're not ramping things up too quickly. But unless the number is helpful then it's actively unhelpful, because it can make you do stupid things (the classic is running around a block at the end of a session, just to reach 10 miles rather than 9.9 - utterly pointless from a training point of view).³

² Not, repeat not, the same as mileage.

³ If you look at the London and Brighton plans, you'll see that both use minutes rather than miles as the way of defining how 'big' a session is going to be. That's exactly the approach I'd take as well, other than a few very specific sessions which are there to test fitness over a known distance.

If it's Sunday night, you've got sore legs, and are a few miles short of your arbitrary 'target', don't go out and plod around just to tick the box. What matters is whether what you do will help in the race that counts, and often you'd be better doing some stretching, eating well, and going to bed. Or spending time with friends and family.

This is where an unnecessarily rigid plan can be harmful, because people force themselves to do things just because 'my plan says I have to', even though it's clearly a stupid idea. That approach is a quick route to injuries, so always give yourself permission flex the plan as necessary. Bend, don't break.

Having said all that, here are some suggestions for someone who's doing London and is already running two or three times a week:

- Aim to start building your longest run towards 10 very easy miles or 90 minutes, whichever comes first. If you can't do that right now, don't worry. Walk sections if you need to. Just aim for a little more each week. Try for maybe 3 runs in a week, 20-30 miles in total - but I say that only because it's not ideal to have your 'long run' representing more than half your weekly distance. I'm not suggesting you make it a target.
- Each week, add a mile or two onto the long run (c10% increase) and slot in a few miles of recovery running and some drills to improve form. The weekly totals will gradually rise, but again that's an outcome not a goal.
- Think about a race mid-late Feb (maybe a 10k) to get a sense of how your body is adapting, and how well you're able to dose your effort. It also helps to be familiar with a race-day environment. For people who've never been in a big race before, city marathons can come as a shock.
- Four or five weeks pre-marathon, consider a half-marathon or other distance up to 20 miles (mid-late March). It's a chance to check fitness and that will help you with appropriate marathon pacing. Only then does it become meaningful to think about any time aspirations, because you know how fit you are.
- Three weeks before the marathon, aim for a long run of 20-22 miles or three hours. This is a dress-rehearsal for the race, not really about fitness. I'll talk about the 'last long run' in detail closer to the time.
- Then bring down the workload in the final weeks. Stay active, but you're maintaining and recovering, not getting fitter at this stage. This is the 'taper'.

Remember that other things count too, so if you're also including cycling, swimming etc., factor that in when you're looking at the workload.

The training mix

In terms of the actual training that you might include:

- Make sure there's a range of speeds – recovery, easy, hard
- Probably the majority of your running will be at easy/moderate effort level⁴
- Maintain variety with different routes and surfaces
- Gradually build up the length of a long, steady run
- After a hard day, have an easy one
- Include things other than running

Gradually make more of it specific to the marathon (for example, include more time spent on long, steady-paced runs). I'll focus on 'The Long Run' in a later note, as well as on what different types of session might involve. But to begin, just make it a habit to do something active, ideally but not necessarily running, on a number of days each week. Do what you enjoy, get used to how your body responds, and (hopefully) start to feel your fitness changing.

Weekly routine

Training should gradually start to become a habit, something that is regular and consistent. If it suits your wider lifestyle, you could have regular days for particular sessions. An example is below:

- Monday – rest, stretching, maybe a swim
- Tuesday – intervals
- Wednesday – easy recovery run, or maybe just rest
- Thursday – hills or tempo
- Friday – rest, yoga
- Saturday – parkrun
- Sunday – long easy run

This is not a plan, just an illustration. It may help to structure each week the same way, but that depends on you. Some people have weekends, some don't. Not everyone has the same amount of available time. Even if you can only train at the weekend, don't squeeze a week's worth of work into two days. Just accept that you've limited time, so you can do limited training.

Make sure you don't get bored and if you enjoy something else (dancing, cycling, rock-climbing) then keep doing it. Running isn't the only way to get fitter. As I'll keep repeating, it's *your* plan. So it needs to motivate you, and it needs to be something that reflects your reality.

⁴ In the note on training sessions, I'll outline some 'training zones'. Crudely speaking, these would be four or five levels of perceived effort, usually far more meaningful than actual 'pace' when you're calibrating how hard to work.

Rest, recover, review

You'll have spotted that rest is included in that example. Rest and recovery are some of the most important 'training sessions' to include and I'll come back to that topic too. For now, bear in mind that more people ruin their marathon by overtraining than undertraining, so 'if in doubt, miss it out'. Don't end up doing mindless junk miles, especially if you're feeling tired or have a slight injury.

Your plan should always (re)start from where you are. If you miss a week, your plan needs to miss a week and start again from there. If you are injured, give your plan the injury too, and re-plan. Injuries are a part of the process – not inevitable, but not surprising, if you're pushing your body to do things it hasn't done before. So if you've missed sessions, that doesn't mean you're 'behind' on your plan. It means the plan is no longer the right plan, and you should rework it.

Being sociable

There are worse things to do than join a group or club. Many sports shops have groups, or you might find a club local to you. Don't be intimidated, clubs are absolutely not full of fast runners. You'll meet people who are both slower and faster than you, and who have similar problems or questions. And the weekly routine of club training sessions will contain a lot that's valuable, typically based on the kind of mix that would suit a 5k or 10k ambition. Perhaps some speed endurance, hills, a track session, and longer social runs. Just by including some of those club sessions each week, it's possible to get a decent mix of workouts without really having to think. If you then add in a gradually-increasing long run, you'd have a basic marathon plan.

Stuff happens

Nobody ever follows a plan in its entirety. As the US Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld put it, 'stuff happens'. Or you can listen to another unlikely philosopher, the boxer Mike Tyson – 'Everyone has a plan till they get punched in the mouth'.



In other words, it's what happens the real world that counts, not some hypothetical plan that assumes everything will go perfectly. It won't. If you miss sessions, that's OK. If you miss a week or a month, that's still fine. Do what you can do, don't worry about what you can't. Just ensure that day by day, week by week, you make sensible decisions and revise the plan as much as you need to.

There are people who've successfully completed marathons with virtually no training whatsoever, and there are some who will have followed an extremely regimented plan and then fallen apart (mentally or physically) on the day. There are no guarantees and no single 'right way' to do this.

Planning as a process

I've deliberately not tried to provide a plan in any detail, so apologies if that's what you were expecting! Hopefully you'll understand now why I'm not a fan of fixed plans (especially if they're defined by mileage)⁵. The best plan is the plan that you will do, and the important thing is that you set plans which you can follow.

If your life is extremely structured and predictable, and you know you will never get any kind of injury or illness, maybe that means you can plan things a month ahead. I don't know many people like that. For others with continually shifting patterns of time use, it might need to be revised every few days. So think of planning as an ongoing process, not a one-off event. Instead of grinding out junk miles, use that time to kick back and think about what worked for you that week. Look ahead at the next week or two, and re-plan based on what will be a sensible approach. It's a much more valuable use of your time.

Remember too, that it's not just 'fitness' that you should be planning. For example, plan when you'll think about your running form, plan when you'll rehearse the 'race day experience', plan when you'll experiment with nutrition, plan when you'll recover.

Three thoughts to finish

- **Take it steady. It's about consistent accumulation of fitness rather than sudden leaps forward. Give your body time to adapt.**
- **Own the plan. Write (or at least adapt) the plan yourself, based on what's possible and motivating for you.**
- **Make planning a process. Change the plan whenever it needs to change.**

⁵ A blog on this from Steve Way. As he says, for most people, any plan is fine. <https://www.chiacharge.co.uk/blogs/news/marathon-training-plans-do-i-need-one-by-steve-way>