



**Previously: nutrition**

**This one: the long run**

**Next: recoveries and injuries**

**You're probably wondering why I've been talking about all sorts of non-running topics (other sports, nutrition, the evils of headphones). And why I haven't focused much on the core task of putting one foot in front of another. After all, isn't that what a marathon involves?**

**Well, the time is now. Let's think about The Long Run.**

**The other types of session outlined in #4 of these notes (Training Sessions) were intervals, easy recovery runs, and tempo/threshold sessions. Most of those would also play a part in training for other distances such as 5-10k. But the Long Run is a particular staple of marathon preparation. It goes under various names – Long Easy Run, Long Slow Distance (LSD), Long Steady Run. But the consistent word here is 'long'.**

### **The purpose of the long run**

There are three main reasons for viewing this as an important feature in a marathon plan – fitness, psychology, and rehearsal.

#### **1. Fitness**

The long run has value for a range of reasons, but whatever else it does, it's obviously a long run, and therefore a significant session which could account for perhaps 40% of your total weekly effort.

The marathon is an aerobic event, so you need to develop some aerobic fitness. That means it takes place at a fairly easy pace. Conversational<sup>1</sup>, or perhaps a minute slower per mile than you might ultimately set as your marathon pace. If you stay at that pace (which will feel easy, at least at the start, maybe 5/6 out of 10) you'll be primarily burning fat rather than carbohydrates. That means there's no massive need to keep topping up with nutrition. And you'll also keep your temperature in check, which simplifies the story on hydration.

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<sup>1</sup> Doing your long run with others can be a very practical way of ensuring you remain at conversational levels all the way - many people go too hard on their long runs. In general, the 'talk test' is one of the most useful approaches for coaches and runners, helping calibrate effort based on the extent to which a conversation is possible.

## 2. Psychology

The mental side of marathon running is often overlooked when people start setting training schedules, and it's just as important as the physical. You'll learn how to control your pace, how to process the messages your muscles will try to send your brain, and how to keep moving forwards even when it gets tough.

The long steady run might start easy, but before the end, you may well find you go through a bad patch or two. The economist J.M. Keynes said that 'in the long run we're all dead'.<sup>2</sup> Well that hopefully isn't the case for *every* long run, but there will certainly be some that feel better than others. But by going through the experience repeatedly, you'll learn to be comfortable with discomfort, and to distinguish between 'good pain' and 'bad pain'. What tricks does your body try to play on you? What do you need to say to yourself to keep going?



All of these will be important when it comes to the big day, in many ways more vital than physical fitness. So your long run is a great opportunity to get your mind and body in tune with one another.

## 3. Rehearsal

A big part of marathon success lies in not sabotaging your race. I've made plenty of mistakes in the past, and in almost every case, they could have been avoided if I'd just rehearsed things properly beforehand. Nothing should be new on marathon day, a point I'll repeat and repeat closer to the day.

If you hear elite sportspeople interviewed, you'll often hear phrases like 'trust my processes' and 'execute my race'. They're saying that they have a way to do things, something they've used previously and which they'll use again to ensure they follow an approach that's right for them. If they can stick to doing things that they know work, even under pressure or when they're nervous, then they give themselves the best chance of success. So this is another vital way in which doing a few long runs can help. It'll build a routine of preparation and pacing, it'll fine tune what clothing and shoes you need, what to eat beforehand, and how to recover afterwards. You'll be building a process for yourself and that's important, because a big marathon can be an intense experience and it's easy to lose control, meaning that you fail to do justice to the work you've done in the previous months.

Things to rehearse include:

- Doing long runs on the same day of the week as the race, at the same time
- Wearing the same clothes, the same shoes (although remember that London Marathon is in late April, and might be warmer than a long run done in Feb)

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<sup>2</sup> He's also good on the pointlessness of irrelevant precision, something I've covered in previous notes. 'It is better to be roughly right than precisely wrong'.

- Eating sensible things for a couple of days beforehand, giving yourself an easy day or two as a mini-taper (and as a recovery afterwards)
- Trying different ways of fuelling and hydrating while running (with or without gels, with or without energy drinks)
- Setting off at an easy pace and maintaining a steady effort all the way
- Including sections of walking if you think you'll do that on race day. Remember, there's nothing about the marathon that says you have to run every step, and a run/walk strategy is a very sensible approach for many people
- Doing it without being dependent on company or technology (even if you do a few with others, or with music, I'd recommend doing a couple of them solo, and trying to dial into your body, your pacing, how you feel)<sup>3</sup>

## Making mistakes

It's definitely best to make the mistakes on your long runs rather than on the day that counts. So here are some classics I've made in the past – you're welcome to try them and see how you feel:

- Set off far too fast
- Wear the wrong shoes
- Become determined (for no reason other than ego or stupidity) to keep up with or overtake someone else
- Forget to wear nipple tape (that's for the boys – maybe wearing the wrong bra would be the female counterpart)
- Eat a hot curry the night before, and make insufficient toilet trips beforehand.

Feel free to make mistakes yourself, as there's no substitute for personal experience in learning what to avoid on marathon day.

## How hard should it feel?

It's important not to run your race on your long run. By which I mean, unless you're experienced, don't run for longer than you think you'll take for the race itself, don't run for more than 22 miles, don't try to speed up at the end, or sprint for a finish.

Keep it at a pace which means you could hold a conversation, or could easily keep breathing through your nose rather than gasping for air. If you're working with training zones, keep it in Blue and Green, stay away from the top end of the scale.



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<sup>3</sup> One other thing to rehearse, which I'll cover another time, is being surrounded by people and noise and the pressure of the starting gun. And that means putting yourself in the race environment.

The reality is that very few people other than you will truly care what your marathon time is, and certainly nobody will care whether you set a PB on your long run, you won't get a medal at the finish, and you will still have more training to do. So don't get diverted by worrying about what you're going to post to Strava, that's not the point.

Don't finish it on your knees. If it's feeling dreadful and your running style is falling apart, stop. You'll be doing yourself no good, you'll increase your chance of an injury, and you'll lose motivation for doing it again. Ensure that (even if you're desperate for it to end) you're trying to stay in good mental and physical shape.

And if you feel an injury mid-run, there's no value in continuing just because it's 'long run day' and the plan said X. Carry cash or a travelcard, so you've got options. Of course you need to learn the difference between fatigue and a niggle, but if you're in any doubt, cut it short.

### How long to run, and when?

There's a saying in the marathon that halfway is 20 miles. Lots of people feel OK up to about the 18-20 point, and then it falls apart. That's usually because they've gone off too fast, and the way to make it easier is to drop the intensity and use your fat reserves as your primary source (rather than glycogen) for as long as possible. At that level, we've all got something like 2 hours of 'operating time', even without taking on any nutrition. So ideally your long runs would build up to 120+ mins, so you become familiar with how the world feels after working at low intensity for an extended period.

The actual distance you cover is a byproduct of the time you take, so I'm always very reluctant to specify distances, as people then lock onto those numbers as if they're the point of these longer efforts. I'm also really wary of appearing to prescribe any particular sessions because I don't know enough about what people will find manageable. There's no perfect answer that applies for everyone.



However, here's a *purely hypothetical* plan for someone with a likely marathon time of around 4h30 (approx 10m15s per mile). It assumes they're able to do their long runs on Sundays. There's a half-marathon in there too, to gauge fitness and help with marathon pacing. Each would involve running at roughly 11 minutes per mile.

As I say, I recommend doing this on time, not distance. So in this example, when the runner reaches 3h30 they stop, regardless of the distance. This is not a prescription for anyone, it's just an illustration of gradually building up, backing off occasionally to consolidate and let your body do its work. If you're not already covering these kinds of times/miles, begin from where you are. If that means 60 mins, 90 mins, 10 miles, 15 miles, whatever, try to add 15mins or a mile or two each week and get to where you can by early April, without injuring yourself. If you miss a few, no worries. If a weekly routine isn't right for you then change it, give yourself a 10-day cycle to create more recovery time between these longer efforts.

16th Feb	2h30	14 miles
23rd Feb	2h45	15 miles
1st Mar	3h15	17 miles
8th Mar	2h45	16 miles
15th Mar	3h30	19 miles
22nd Mar	Half marathon	
29th Mar	3h45	21-22 miles
5th Apr	3h30	18-20 miles

### Advanced versions

My recommendation is to take it steady all the way, in terms of effort. That may or may not mean a consistent pace for every mile, depending on hills, surface, road crossings, or toilet stops. It's the effort that counts, so don't beat yourself up to hit certain splits. They're pretty much irrelevant. If in doubt, go slower.

However, here are a couple of more advanced versions that some people might want to try once or twice, if they've got a reasonably realistic view of what their marathon pace could be:

- Fast finish – a gradual acceleration so that you run at your marathon effort for the last five miles. Not a sprint finish, just a slight acceleration so you know it feels to run at that pace with a couple of hours of running already in your legs. Make sure to cool down for the last few minutes.
- Surges – after maybe an hour of easy running, complete your long run with intervals that are alternately slightly faster and slightly slower than your likely marathon pace. E.g. if your possible marathon pace would be 10 minute miles, you could do 5 mins at 9:45 and 5 mins at 10:15, repeated throughout the remainder of your run. By feeling the differences between them, this could help you fine-tune your pacing for the race itself.

### What if it feels awful?

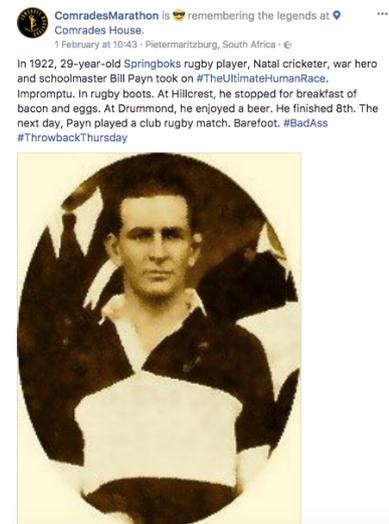
Many people find an occasional long run can feel dreadful, but it's better to get your bad day out of the way before the marathon itself. Remember you're doing this on tired legs, and marathon day will be a different day, you'll be fresh at the end of a taper period, you'll be motivated, and you'll have a crowd there to keep you going. So if it feels bad, look back at what you could have done differently – pacing, kit, curry etc. – and learn the necessary lessons. And don't worry, the marathon is another day. A bad long run is a great teacher. And it's also a good thing to share with the world, showing that the journey is hard (and hopefully unlocking some donations).

## And what if I can't do them at all?

Maybe you've got an illness or an injury. Maybe you simply don't have time. Maybe you are training in a place where it's impossible to cover big distances and you need to be creative.<sup>4</sup>

You can only do what you can do. Plenty of people have done lots of long runs and had a disappointing race. Long runs don't guarantee success. Equally, plenty of people have done marathons with few or no long runs, and it's possible to complete the distance without too much drama. Yes, you'd need to go at a cautious pace, and probably plan to include stretches of walking. But that's fine - you'd still be completing the marathon. So don't panic if you're not able to get a lot of long runs in.

One of my favourite stories is that of Bill Payn, who ran the more-than-double-marathon Comrades race in South Africa in 1922.<sup>5</sup> He entered the night before, ran in rugby boots, drank beer and brandy on the way, and finished 8th. And played rugby the next day. There are no absolute rules when it comes to long-run preparation, race-day nutrition, or recovery.



**The long run is an important part of marathon training for many people. If you're not able to do one every week then don't worry too much, but if you can then it will bring benefits that are both physical and mental, and it will provide an important rehearsal for the marathon itself.**

Three points, as ever:

- **It's about psychology as much as physiology**
- **Build the duration gradually and don't rush the mileage**
- **Look back and learn – what worked, what didn't, what are the lessons for your marathon?**

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<sup>4</sup> A friend prepared for ultramarathons while working for the UN in Gaza. Her training involved running around a rooftop, dragging a tyre. There's also this: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/feb/12/coronavirus-chinese-man-under-lockdown-runs-31-miles-in-his-living-room>

<sup>5</sup> A race I've run three times. It's beautiful, but it's a brute - from Durban to Pietermaritzburg, or the other way around. Approximately 90k, with a lot of hills.