

A Guide for Advanced Marathon Training – John Burnett.

Guidelines for Advanced Marathon Training

These guidelines are the views and thoughts of John Burnett recommended for Top Club/Elite level runners.

OVERALL MILEAGE

This has been proven to be the number one factor to improve your marathon capability. In short, the more you run, the more aerobically fit you will become.

- If you have reached a plateau, increasing your overall weekly mileage would be my first recommendation for setting a new pb. However, don't increase your mileage too quickly otherwise you increase your risk of injury.
- Always listen to your body and reduce your mileage until you feel ok again. A week or two of lower mileage will have no lasting consequence.
- Never play catch-up.
- Adjust your training plan, and if necessary, your targets, if you need to. Consider cross-training too.
- A consequence of increasing your mileage is that you might not feel able to complete some of the higher intensity workouts in your training plan, so bear in mind which you are prepared to compromise if you do find yourself in this situation

LONG RUNS

It will come as absolutely no surprise that this is the number one run of the week that every marathon runner feels compelled to do. The general advice is to gradually build up the distance of your long run over a number of months.

- The jury is out on what should be the top distance that you reach. Some people like to do a full marathon in training (possibly more of a psychological benefit than physiological), some people stop at 20 miles, or 30 km, but that is probably more just because they're round numbers.
- One piece of advice I've heard is that your 5 longest runs should add up to between 90 and 110 miles, which is a balance between getting a few good long runs in without negatively affecting the rest of your training during those heavy weeks, and it also emphasises that consistency is king. One super-long run won't make your marathon, and similarly, one missed week won't break it either.
- Regarding intensity, the jury is also out on this one too. Some people like to run them easy, or even super-easy, focussing on time-on-feet, up to 3 mins/mile slower than race pace. Others feel they should be within 1 min/mile of their race pace, but regardless of what you pick, it's got to be sustainable – there's no point if you can't manage a run for two days afterwards.
- One strategy that some people like is to start easy and build up their speed, breaking their run into 3 segments of increasing intensity. Another, (not every week though) is to do some of your long run at marathon pace. Starting early in the training plan with say 15 miles with 4 at MP, and perhaps closer to the end, 22 miles with 14 at MP.

AEROBIC TRAINING

This is the bread and butter of your week. These runs should ideally be between MP+10% to MP+20%. So if you're targeting a 3hour marathon, (6:52 pace), your aerobic runs would be in the region of 7:33 to 8:14 pace. If you set off for a run and you feel like this is a real struggle, you should probably consider dropping this down to a recovery run and review your training plan to see if it's realistic.

MEDIUM LONG RUNS

In order to reach your target mileage, you probably can't avoid this one anyway. A midweek medium long run, (9-14 miles) is a good way to increase your mileage for the week, and should ideally be done at your aerobic training pace. Again, if this feels too hard, reassess other areas of your plan

RECOVERY RUNS

After a hard run, the next day should be an easy one. Leave your ego at the door, your Strava fan club might not give you as much kudos, but they're not running your marathon.

- This should be fairly short (6miles or less) and feel really easy, MP+2min/mile would be quite sensible. Maybe even slower if you've just nailed a half marathon for example.
- Or a rest day, or a day on the bike or swimming perhaps.
- The idea is that a few miles gentle running will activate the blood flow and encourage muscle repair more quickly than just sitting on the couch. But if your muscles are really sore, perhaps the couch is the place to be

TEMPO RUNS

One of my favourites is to find a route that takes around an hour that doesn't have many difficult road crossings that you can have a reasonable crack at. If you can fit in a tempo run once every couple of weeks, at around MP+15-30s (sub 7:22 for the 3-hour marathoner), you will find this will boost your efficiency at the half marathon too. Don't go crazy, you need to be able to run the next day

INTERVALS

- Running (in reps) for 20-30 minutes at a pace slightly quicker than your half marathon pace will make marathon pace feel slow in comparison.
- Running at a pace close to your **Lactate Threshold* (LT)** (the pace you could hold for around an hour) is one of the best ways of improving your long-distance speed. This could be in the form of long reps (1 mile, 10 mins, 3k perhaps) or a single solid block of time, up to around 30 mins, although that does get pretty tough. I find a treadmill (on a 1% incline to mimic wind resistance) a good way of ensuring the pace is right if you want to do that.

***Lactate Threshold** is an important training zone to target to improve fitness. Lactate accumulates in your blood when you run. If you run slowly, your body can clear it as quickly as you produce it. As you increase your speed, your lactate production rate increases. If you run more quickly than your lactate threshold (where your production rate and clearance rate are the same), you will build up lactic acid in your muscles, and it is this acid that prevents the conversion of glycogen into energy, giving the classic jelly-legged feeling you experience if you run a 400m, 800m or mile as quickly as you possibly could. For most people, their lactate threshold roughly corresponds with the speed they can run at for about an hour.

OTHER STUFF

Pick and choose from this list what appeals / what you think might need more attention. There's a wealth of information available online and in books and from other runners.

- Hill reps – Some people like to do long hill reps, others like to do rolling hills, round Swinley forest for example. Other people avoid them like the plague. One short session that has caught my attention as a good strength training routine is 6 x 12s uphill sprint. Being short it takes relatively little time to complete, and focusses your attention on maximum power which naturally leads to your best technique
- Cross Country – Speedwork and strength training together. Plus great company and free tea and cakes afterwards!
- Strength training – There's a lot of advice from a lot of people with better knowledge than me out there. But I've read a number of times that it's not about high rep count, but maximal weight bearing efforts that produces the best strength gains without adding any real muscle mass.
- Plyometrics – this is basically dynamic strength training in the form of jumping and hopping. It could be good fun but make sure you're not nursing any niggles before you try this, or it will find your weak points.
- Strides – 8 x 30s gradually increasing the pace to a gentle sprint during a regular aerobic run helps to keep the legs feeling light
- Stretching – For fear of being a hypocrite, I'll leave this to someone else to explain!
- Foam rolling – Very useful to keep niggles at bay. Some people do it religiously.
- Cross-training – The more specific it is to running, the better it will be for your running. There is no activity better than running for improving your running (same for any other sport), but if you cycle to work, or are trying to keep an injury at bay, or whatever, if you work your heart, it will help.
- Nutrition – see stretching. Carbs and protein and large portions for me 😊. Practice your gels and drinking during your long runs. I found out I couldn't tolerate the Lucozade that is provided for London, so I bought some Maurten gels, which are more expensive (£3 each) but they are the most easily digested gels on the market. They feel a bit like a softened jelly baby. You don't need to drink water to digest them, they're a hydrogel. I'm not paid to advertise for them, but they are good!
- Sleeping – I'm a new dad, see stretching! They recommend 8 hours a day for optimal recovery, but I know this isn't possible for many people.
- Double-days – This time round I'll be doing plenty of running to & from work, which is a very handy way of increasing the mileage without doing lots of long runs. If you're aiming for over 80 mpw, you'll have to do this somehow.
- Visualisation – probably best to read up on this, but if you can visualise your goals, and you tell your nearest and dearest about them, you're more likely to achieve them
- Tapering – some people go for 2 weeks, others 3. Some people like to increase their number of rest days, while others like to keep the same running frequency but reduce the volume. They will often maintain the intensity as it will feel easier with the reduced mileage. Do whatever suits you, it's your race.