

5 steps to a faster marathon

1. Consistency

I always have consistency at the top of the pile. It isn't glamorous but it is effective. Sure, you might get lucky with random training but more than likely, you will get found out on race day. It doesn't matter if you're running 3 times a week or clocking 100+ miles, doing what you can consistently will lead to the best results for the amount of effort you put in. It's also much more likely to insure you against injury.

Running 5 times one week, then 1 the next then 6 means your body isn't prepared for the big swings and jumps and you are much more likely to aggravate something. Injury leads to a loss of consistency too as you have to stop or dial back training so it's a vicious cycle. Build up slowly and **be consistent**.



Action point: How many sessions a week can you commit to and when will you do them?



2. Expand your goals and mindset

Sometimes a fear of failure can mean we undershoot when setting our goal. It's easier to say 'I'm not ready' and set something more achievable. But by setting a **'stretch' goal**, we can allow ourselves to aim a bit higher in the knowledge that if we fall a bit short, we will still achieve something we're really proud of. A 'stretch' goal is typically something that we feel is slightly beyond our capabilities but that we would **really love to achieve**.

We can also convince ourselves that we can't get faster. The fact is that most of us can improve some aspect of our training or race execution and we really don't know what is possible until we've exhausted all the avenues.



Action point: Pick a 'stretch' goal as well as a more achievable goal for your next marathon and write it down.



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3. Keep easy, easy

Easy running is sometimes overlooked as unnecessary (or junk) miles, however, every time you run, you are improving your aerobic fitness which is the engine you will need to run a marathon well. I roughly follow an **80/20 split** with 80% of my miles at an easy pace. This is easier to do the more miles you run but it is still important with lower mileage because a high percentage of high intensity work can put a lot of stress on the body and lead you to not get the best out of those sessions.

Also there can be a tendency to run 'easy' runs too hard. This adds to the stress on the body and means that it's tougher to perform well in harder sessions. Make sure you always know what the purpose of every session is and make sure the effort level is appropriate. If you're not sure how easy it should be, you can go by feel, pace, heart rate or a combination:

Feel - no more than **4/10** effort - should be able to have a **full conversation** and should feel in total control at all times.

Pace - try **60-90s** a mile slower than marathon pace

Heart rate - no more than **80% of maximum heart rate**



✓ **Action points:** Work out roughly what percentage of your miles a week are easy. If you are well below 80%, write down how you can increase that percentage.



✓ Write down your method(s) of tracking your easy effort and monitor on your next easy run. Did you have to run slower to get your session to be truly easy?

Tip - Some ways to do this: add in an extra easy session, cut back some harder mileage, add more miles to your warm up and cool down



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4. Fast finish long runs

If there is one session in the plans I have followed since 2018 that have really pushed me on in the marathon it is the **fast finish long run**. Not only is there a physical benefit of running miles just below lactate threshold, designed to push that boundary, but the mental benefits from pushing yourself harder when you are tired and finding that extra gear are huge.

To maintain your best pace at the end of the marathon, the effort level has to increase dramatically. You might start out at a **6 out of 10** effort but by the end, it is going to be **everything you can muster**. Practising upping the pace at the end of a long run will help you to maintain pace or even pick it up slightly at the end of the marathon. This can stop you losing minutes on your time and you will likely be passing other people who are dropping off which further boosts your own confidence.

For a fast finish long run, I prefer a **gradual increase in pace from halfway and finish the last 3 to 4 miles at marathon pace** (or even a bit quicker if you can). I tend to do these types of runs after building up the mileage so that early long runs in the cycle are just at an easy pace.



Action point: Target some of your long runs to be 'fast finish'. Are you able to hit marathon pace for the last 3? Does it feel too easy - could you run a little faster? If it is, then you may be able to reduce your time goal a bit.



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5. Race nutrition

Race nutrition is critical and something that did not go well in some of my early marathons. The key is to choose a **fast acting carbohydrate source** that you like and is convenient. Gels are the most obvious as they're portable and there's lots of different types to choose from. Practise taking them in some training sessions to get used to them and ensure you don't get any stomach issues. You don't need them all the time but you want to make sure that you know you won't get bored of them (so practise in long runs) and that you are able to take them whilst running at a decent pace (try it on tempos or fast finish long runs).

The optimal guidelines from research suggest **60-90g carbohydrate per hour** which can be a lot of gels (they usually range from 20-30g carbohydrate) and too much can cause stomach upset so it's important to find a balance that works for you. I prefer to think in terms of **taking a gel every 3 miles or 5k** which means that every runner then has around 8 gels or 200g carbohydrate. That is going to equate to between 30 and 90g carbohydrate an hour depending on speed.

In theory, whilst the energy requirements for running a marathon are going to be slightly different depending on speed, efficiency and weight of a runner, they are not likely to be too far away from **100 calories per mile** (or 2620 calories). This means that a 6 hour runner does not need to take twice as many gels as a 3 hour runner as they are going to burn a similar amount of calories. Therefore, spacing out by distance rather than time is a more practical general recommendation.

Hydration is also critically important. Even a small drop in hydration can lead to impaired performance. Taking water with **electrolytes** is the best way to avoid dehydration though it is difficult to give a figure of how much because it will vary greatly depending on how much you sweat. You'll need to take the weather into consideration and also whether you are a heavy perspirer. In general, if you are feeling thirsty then you haven't drunk enough but you don't need to drink gallons either. **Sipping constantly** round the course is probably the best approach ensuring you take on more in hot weather.

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Note: Taking on lots of water without electrolytes can lead to hyponatremia which can have severe health consequences. Electrolytes help regulate the amount of water in cells in the body but you lose these in sweat, so it's important that you replace these. If in doubt, consult a medical expert.



Action point: Write out a fueling plan for your marathon and test it out in training. Try different types of gels to find ones you like. You can plan to have different ones as you go through the race. Test this out in your training.



Thank you for reading! If you have enjoyed this guide but feel you need more guidance in your running and nutrition then please reach out to me:



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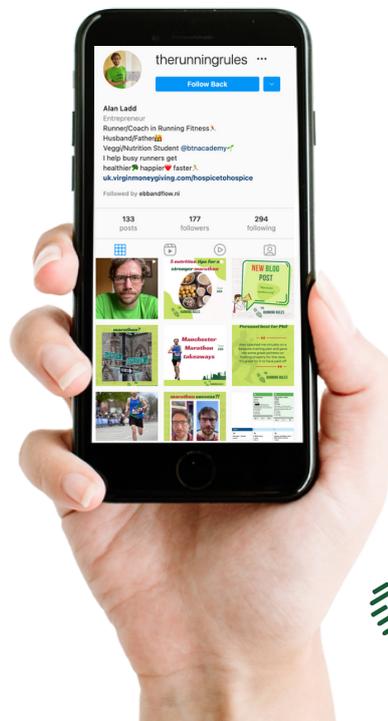
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