

MARATHON



If you've been thinking of joining a marathon, here are six important steps to get you up and running.

By Catherine Cardinal

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1 SET REALISTIC GOALS

"When working on your race schedule, plan some as practice runs and others as the "real deal" to try and outperform yourself and beat your personal best times," says Guy Thibault, research consultant for the Quebec Ministry of Education, Leisure and Sport, who recommends setting goals and writing them down.

2 TRAIN IN PHASES

Running is not a sport to adopt haphazardly, especially if you want to avoid injury. It is always smart to separate the year into these four phases of training:

PHASE 1: PROGRESSION

Although this beginning stage may be long and seemingly slow, it's important for allowing the body to adapt to the rigours of running. As the body's physical endurance and strength increases, so can the intensity of your pace.

PHASE 2: INTENSITY

Ten to 14 days of rigorous training.

PHASE 3: FINE-TUNING

The week before a race, push your limits. Thibault says that it's important to "reduce the number of low-intensity runs so that the daily volume of training is down 40% to 60%. However, maintain the number of high-intensity runs, making sure that the overall difficulty is moderate."

PHASE 4: REST

This post-marathon break time is essential – and can last over two to four weeks.

3 MIND YOUR TECHNIQUE

To run effectively (and for a long time), it's best to remember these five concepts:

I: WARM-UP

Each run should start with a warm-up period – a slow jog followed by stretches for the lower half of the body.

II: PROGRESSION

At the start of the running season, short runs are key – aim for five to 10 minutes at first. If you want to do more, take up a complementary activity, such as weight training, walking or swimming.

III: VARIATION

Keep things interesting by varying your runs. Thibault recommends alternating medium to intense speeds with moments of walking.

IV: INJURY PREVENTION

Running is hard on the body, so proper equipment is crucial. Choose your shoes based on your foot's shape and stride style, a task best left to the pros.

V: MODERATION

For many, running can become a quasi-addiction, so practise moderation: You'll be a better runner for it. Don't run two days in a row, and take three to four days off every two and a half weeks.

4 OPTIMIZE YOUR PERFORMANCE

Here are a couple key points for getting the most out of your runs.

INTERVAL TRAINING

Forget long, moderately paced runs: They cost time and energy without improving skills. Opt for interval training instead. Thibault advises, "Alternate hard effort at an almost-sprinting pace (between 10 seconds to 2 minutes) and recuperation periods (1 to 2 minutes)."

REST PERIODS

After a strenuous training session (or after a race), give yourself time to recuperate. Drink plenty of liquids during, eat a carbohydrate-rich meal after and take the intensity down a few notches for subsequent runs and workouts. Of course, a healthy diet and sufficient sleep are essential all the time.

5 AVOID PITFALLS

A marathon can either renew passion for running or extinguish the flame. Here's how to keep enthusiasm levels high.

KNOW WHEN TO STOP

Many runners train despite injury. Listen to your body: Doing otherwise can hinder future performance.

TAKE YOUR TIME

According to Guy Thibault, the most common error is "stepping up the training too quickly and always training at the same pace." Think slow progression and interval training.

UNDERSTAND WHAT WORKS FOR YOU

Inspiring oneself by champions is a common yet serious mistake. For the best results, learn to know and listen to your body. "I noticed that within a group of high-level runners, the amount of daily training varied tremendously," explains Thibault. "While many think that you cannot excel without intense training, I have known runners who could run a marathon in two and a half hours while training for less than 65 km per week."

THINK QUALITY, NOT QUANTITY

It's best to work on short distances rather than running tediously long runs without reaching your goals. Doing a 5K, 10K or half-marathon is far more motivating, and odds are you'll have an easier time beating your personal best.

6 BUILD A SCHEDULE

What to do before, during and after a race.

THE WEEKS LEADING UP TO A RACE

Stay loyal to your training schedule to avoid over- or under-training. To minimize risk of injury, never increase training by more than 5% per week. It's not about being inflexible and never straying from the plan: It's about staying in tune with and listening to your body.

SEVEN DAYS PRIOR TO A RACE

This is the fine-tuning period, so reduce overall training by 40% to 60% while maintaining the amount of high-intensity training. In other words, no "filler": no moderate-intensity training, no cool-down. Go with the essentials only. It's also important during this week to eat appropriately. Three days before a marathon, reduce your diet's fat content and increase portions of slow-burning sugars.

THE DAY OF THE RACE

The cardinal rule: On D-day, never (ever!) try anything new. From what you eat to what you wear, stick with what you know. Upon waking up, do 10 minutes of low-impact physical activity to prepare the body for the effort to come and help shorten the warm-up period required before the race. Three hours before heading to the start line, eat a carbohydrate-rich breakfast. During the run, drink the equivalent of half a litre per hour. If it's extremely hot, think about not running at all: Heatstroke can be fatal.

POST-RUN

Pat yourself on the back and then give your body time to recuperate: It'll need it. ◀