

It's Taper Time

The final 3 weeks are the most important in any marathon-training program. Here's everything you need to know and do leading up to race day

by: **Bob Cooper**

There are as many marathon-training plans as there are marathoners. So how do you know if you're following a good one? Take a look at the last 3 weeks.

Every good marathon-training plan should "taper" during those final 21 days. That means you run less and rest more. For some people, the idea of backing off on their training just before the big race seems counterintuitive. "So many runners train hard right up to the day of the marathon because they're desperately afraid of losing fitness if they don't," says Patti Finke, who coaches 250 marathoners a year as co-director of the Portland (Oregon) Marathon Clinic. "What they don't realize is that in those last few weeks it's the rest more than the work that makes you strong. And you don't lose fitness in 3 weeks of tapering. In fact, studies show that your aerobic capacity, the best gauge of fitness, doesn't change at all."

Research reveals a lot more than that. A review of 50 studies on tapering published in the journal *Medicine & Science in Sports & Exercise* shows that levels of muscle glycogen, enzymes, antioxidants, and hormones--all depleted by high mileage--return to optimal ranges during a taper. The muscle damage that occurs during sustained training is also repaired. And if that isn't enough, immune function and muscle strength improve, as well, which reduces the odds you'll catch a cold or get injured just before the race. And get this: The average performance improvement by the subjects who tapered in these studies was 3 percent. That works out to 5 to 10 minutes in a marathon.

The review's main conclusion: "The primary aim of the taper should be to minimize accumulated fatigue, rather than to attain additional physiological adaptations or fitness gains." In other words, it's time to chill.

So don't blow it after all those weeks of training. The following plan shows you exactly how to modify your running, thinking, and eating in those 3 crucial weeks before you toe the line. So relax. We've got you covered.

3 WEEKS TO GO

Week 1 of the taper begins the day after your last long run of about 20 miles, 3 weeks before the marathon. The taper starts gradually, because this training still "counts," and a dramatic drop in workload isn't necessary yet. This week, you need to run a bit less, eat a bit more protein, troubleshoot your race plan, and choose your race-day shoes.

Training Checklist

1. Last week should have been your highest-mileage week. This week, stick with the same basic running schedule you've been following, just decrease your total mileage from last week by at least 20 percent.
2. Your shorter weekday runs shouldn't be much different than last week's, but shave a mile or 2 off

your longer midweek runs.

3. Generally, weekday training should consist of one medium long run of 8 to 10 miles, one marathon-goal-pace run of 4 to 6 miles, one nonrunning day, and two runs of 3 to 5 miles.

4. Your weekend long run (2 weeks before the marathon) should be a 12- to 14-miler at the same pace--not faster--as the previous week's 20-miler.

5. Except for the marathon-goal-pace run, all running this week should be at a relaxed pace of 11/2 to 2 minutes slower per mile than marathon goal pace.

6. Avoid running extremely hilly courses, hill repetitions, or speed workouts. This kind of training leads to muscle-tissue damage, which you need to minimize throughout your taper.

Mental Preparation

7. "Think of all the problems that could arise and work through how you'll handle them," says Kate Hays, Ph.D., a sports psychologist, longtime runner, and director of the starting-line "psyching team" at the Toronto Marathon. "Doing this will provide solutions so that you won't panic in case one of the scenarios does occur, and it reduces your anxiety because you'll know you're ready for any situation." Mentally rehearse the following scenarios:

- It's warm, freezing, or blustery. Less-than-ideal conditions mean you have to adjust your time goals. Headwinds can slow your finish time by several minutes, and heat or cold by even more. A survey of marathon finish times suggests that 55 degrees is the ideal temperature, a temperature of 35 or 75 degrees adds 7 percent to your time, and an 85-degree day adds 10 percent.
- You start out ahead of goal pace. Slow down to goal pace as soon as you figure this out (hopefully no later than when you hit the first mile marker), because running an even pace is crucial.
- You start out slower than goal pace. Speed up, but only to goal pace, because trying to "make up for lost time" is a fool's game. You can still achieve your goal time by speeding up slightly during the second half of the race.
- You slip off goal pace midrace. This is the time to become your own cheerleader. Coax yourself back into the groove by thinking about all the training you put in and how badly you want to achieve your goal.
- Your old (knee/shin/foot) problem acts up at midrace. Decide in advance how bad it has to get before you'll drop out. A good guideline is that if the pain forces you to alter your stride, drop out so you don't develop a long-term injury.
- A side stitch strikes. As excruciating as these can be, plan on hanging in there, because most stitches vanish within a couple of miles--especially if you slow down and apply pressure to the area where you feel the stitch.

Nutritional Needs

8. "Take in a lot of protein this week to aid in the repair and recovery of muscle tissue damaged during the high-mileage phase of marathon training," says Alan Tichenal, Ph.D., a University of Hawaii sports nutritionist and 20-time finisher of the Honolulu Marathon. Shoot for 75 to 100 grams of protein per day.

9. If you don't eat meat, fill up on protein from eggs, beans, dairy, and soy products.

10. To rebuild your literally "run-down" immune defenses and possibly prevent a cold or flu, load up on Vitamin C. Kiwis, orange juice, red bell peppers, broccoli, and strawberries are the most potent food sources.

11. Stock up on lysine, an amino acid found mostly in meat and fish that will further help your immune functions. Wheat germ or a 500-milligram supplement are the best vegetarian options.

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And Don't Forget

12. This week, buy the shoes you plan to wear in the marathon, and wear them on most of your runs until race day. Stick with a brand or model that's worked well for you in the past.
13. If you already have shoes in mind for the race, be sure they're adequately broken in, but not worn down. Most running shoes lose their cushioning and resiliency at 300 to 500 miles.

2 WEEKS TO GO

Week 2 is a transitional period. You're halfway between the agony of your last 20-miler and the ecstasy of the marathon. Rest truly replaces training as the most important element of your race preparations, and race strategizing takes on increasing importance.

Training Checklist

1. Your mileage this week should be about half to two-thirds the amount you ran during your highest mileage week.
2. Almost all running should be slow (1 1/2 to 2 minutes slower than marathon goal pace) except for 2 miles run in the middle of a midweek 4-miler at marathon goal pace. "Even this small amount of goal-pace running is important because it physically and mentally reinforces the pace you want to run on race day," says Finke. "This follows the rule of specificity--simulating as closely as possible what you hope to do in competition." It's also fine to throw in a few 100-meter strides after one or two workouts just to help you stay smooth and loose.
3. Weekday short runs should not exceed 4 miles.
4. Your longest weekday run should be 6 to 10 miles.
5. Your weekend long run (1 week before the race) should be 8 to 10 miles. Any longer and your muscles may not be able to fully rebound before the race.

Mental Preparation

6. "Set multiple goals so you won't come away from the race empty-handed," says Hays. "Set three time goals-- 'fantastic,' 'really good,' and 'I can live with that' finish times." These can each be separated by 5 to 15 minutes.
7. Set general goals, such as not walking, finishing strong, or simply enjoying yourself.
8. Check the race Web site for race-morning particulars such as start time, and work out the details of how you'll get to the start on marathon day. Logistics you'll want to consider: where you'll park; how early you want to arrive (an hour before start time is ideal); where you'll stow your gear during the race.
9. Also check the race Web site for the course map and study it.
10. If the race is local, drive the course or run key sections to make it easier to visualize between now and race day.

Nutritional Needs

11. Your mileage may be dwindling, but keep those calories coming in as usual. Your body still needs to repair tissue damaged during your mileage build-up. "This is no time to diet," says Tichenal.
12. Even though you're running less, resist the temptation to cut way back on fat. A reasonable proportion of dietary fat (30 percent of your daily calories) is beneficial because it can be accessed as a backup energy source when stored carbs are used up. Fat reserves can therefore postpone or prevent a race-day collision with the notorious "wall."
13. Eat foods that are high in unsaturated fat, such as nuts or fish cooked in canola oil. Limit foods that are high in saturated fat and trans fats, such as pizza and ice cream.

And Don't Forget

14. If you've been lifting weights as part of your training program, stop. Weight training at this stage of the game can't help your race, but it can sap your strength or cause an injury.

1 WEEK TO GO

During Week 3 of your taper, things can get ugly. Two weeks ago you ran 20 miles in a single run, but now you won't run this amount all week. And as your mileage plummets, your worries can skyrocket. But take comfort that thousands of other marathoners preparing to race this coming weekend are going through the exact same thing. And take refuge in your final mission: to ensure that your body is sufficiently fueled, hydrated, refreshed, and recovered for the task.

Training Checklist

1. Beginning on Monday, do no runs longer than 4 miles. And when you do head out, remember that these jaunts are more for your head than your body, because training has little effect this week.
2. Almost all running should be at 1 1/2 to 2 minutes per mile slower than marathon goal pace--except a Tuesday 2-miler at marathon goal pace, sandwiched by 1-mile jogs. Again, if you want, throw in some quick 100-meter strides after one or two of your workouts. This helps fight off the sluggish feeling that can occur during your taper.
3. Three days before the race, run just 2 to 3 miles easy.
4. Two days before the race, don't run at all.
5. On the day before the race, jog 2 miles to take the edge off your pent-up energy so you'll sleep better that night.

Mental Preparation

6. "Confidence should be the focus of the final week," says Hays, "but you may still experience anxiety. If so, remind yourself that you're physically prepared because you did the necessary training, and you're mentally prepared because you did the necessary trouble-shooting and goal-setting."
7. Try to minimize job, relationship, and travel stresses all week.
8. If you're nervous about the race, try breathing exercises to relax. Breathe in and out as slowly and deeply as possible, letting your belly expand as you inhale. Focus your attention on the breathing and any positive, calming image.
9. If you're too super-charged with energy to sleep, try this relaxation exercise. First tense, then relax your muscles, one at a time, starting with the muscles in your face and working down to your toes. Sex can also help relax your mind and body.

Nutritional Needs

10. "Emphasize carbohydrates more than usual in the last 3 days before the race," says Tichenal. About 60 to 70 percent of your calories should come from carbohydrate sources. Pasta, potatoes, rice, cereals, and fruit are healthy choices, but even sodas and sweets do the job. It all turns into muscle glycogen.
11. Wash all those carbs down with fluids so your energy and water levels are high on race morning. Alcoholic beverages don't count toward your fluid totals, however, and you'll need to make up for their diuretic effect by drinking extra fluids. You know you're adequately hydrated if your urine is clear or pale yellow in color.
12. Don't restrict the salt in your diet. Low salt intake combined with excessive hydration can lead to hyponatremia, a rare but dangerous condition that can afflict marathoners. Drinking sports drinks and snacking on salted popcorn and pretzels will help keep your sodium levels up.
13. Don't look at the scale. Because of your fully stocked fluid and fuel stores you're likely to gain a couple pounds this week. But it's worth the weight. Having your body's energy reserves at full capacity will do more for your race than weighing a little less--and you'll lose those pounds by the finish line anyway.

And Don't Forget

14. Don't do anything tiring. Let the grass grow. Let the kids take out the garbage. Let the dog walk himself.
15. Don't try anything new. No new foods, drinks, or sports.
16. Don't cross-train, hike, or bike.
17. Don't get a sports massage unless it's part of your routine. You may feel bruised a couple days

afterward if you're not accustomed to it.

18. Stay off your feet and catch up on movies, books, and sleep. If you go to the pre-race expo, don't stay long.

19. Remember: During this final week, you can't under-do. You can only overdo.

The Final Hours

Feeling calm, confident, and in control is your mission on race morning. Here's how to come by the three Cs:

1. Be sure your race outfit, shoes, timing chip, number, bag, and map to the start are set out the night before, so a treasure hunt isn't required in the morning.
2. Eat a light, easily-digestible meal, such as oatmeal or white toast and a banana, at least 2 hours before the start. Make sure you've eaten these foods before a few training runs with no adverse effects.
3. Drink 8 to 16 ounces of sports drink 60 to 90 minutes before the race.
4. Arrive at the start about an hour early, so you won't have to rush.
5. Joke around with friends or fellow runners before the race to lighten your mood.
6. About 25 minutes before the start, do some walking, slow jogging, then a few 50-meter pickups at race pace. Visit the portajohn one last time. Mentally review your race plan.
7. Position yourself appropriately at the start according to your projected pace, and remind yourself to start easy! You'll be glad you did when late in the race you're able to pass all those runners who started too fast.

Taper Tips for Shorter Races

The taper is nearly as important for a short race as for a marathon; it just doesn't need to last as long.

1. For half-marathons, limit your long run on the previous weekend to 8 or 10 miles, and cut your usual run distances in half the rest of the week.
2. For 5-Ks to 10-milers, cut your mileage in half for 3 to 5 days before the race.
3. If you do any speedwork in the last 3 to 6 days before a sub-marathon-distance race, make it only a third of a normal speed session.
4. Carbo-load in the last 3 days before a half-marathon if you wish, though it's less crucial than it is for a marathon.
5. Don't carbo-load before races shorter than 10 miles, because it doesn't help and the extra weight you may gain will slow you down.
6. If you're nervous in the days before a sub-marathon race, remind yourself that you can run another one in a few weeks if it doesn't go well.