

Improve your chances of hitting a marathon goal

Thirteen out of fifteen members of the HPR coaching group who have run a marathon in 2022 have either run a personal best or made a strong debut.

Although individual coaching and customisation of training makes a difference there are a number of basic preparation cues that help to achieve a high success rate.

1. Set a goal which is achievable. Be honest with where are you now fitness wise. What pace do you need to run to achieve your target time? How much fitter do you need to be on race day? Have you got enough time to achieve your target? Keep your goal time to yourself (and your coach if you have one). There is less pressure on you then.
2. Do your research and analyse the requirements of your target event. What is the course profile like? What weather conditions are likely? Speak to other runners who have done the same race before. If you want a personal best more than an experience choose your race carefully. Big city marathons can be extra tiring and stressful in terms of travel / hotels / eating etc. A night in your own bed before Manchester may be better than a hotel in London.
3. It is tough with year round racing but force yourself to take a few weeks easier training wise before you start your marathon training block to refresh your legs and mind and sort out any niggles.
4. Keep your marathon specific training block relatively short so you stay focused, keep the quality high and reduce the risks of overtraining and injury before you get to your target race. In my experience 9-12 weeks works better for most experienced (and already fit) runners than 16-20 weeks or more (which may be more suitable for novices/beginners)
5. The right races at the right time in the build-up can help with both fitness and confidence, but you really need to increase and maintain your training volume and long runs in particular, so avoid too many distracting minor races in the marathon training block. Your last hard race should be at least 3-4 weeks before your marathon to allow sufficient recovery.
6. If you have successfully completed a marathon in the last year replicating the training you did for that should be your start point. Small refinements in successful training rather than wholesale changes are usually the best strategy.
7. The most important marathon training component are general aerobic training volume / miles per week and long runs (2 hours or more). To a large extent the more you can do, the better you will run in your marathon.

I'd recommend alternating two different types of long run. Slower pace runs (1-2 mins slower than target marathon pace) build up the time on feet without breaking you down.

Sustained longer runs (between target marathon target pace and 30 seconds per mile slower) build up specific marathon endurance and target pace conditioning. In both cases start shorter than you think you could do and progress the distance with determination over

the training block. Don't avoid the hills in North Staffordshire, they are a bonus.

8. During the marathon training block pay extra attention to your diet and sleep. They are just as important as the training itself. If it is hard normally to do this due to work / family life a shorter training block will help you to stay focused.
9. Practice pre-race and race fuelling and hydration. Test gels and drinks on your stomach on the more sustained long runs to find the application rate that suits you. Don't try anything new on the days before / day of the race. Avoid taking gels on your slower pace time on feet long runs – you may become dependent on them and less fuel efficient.
10. After all the training make sure you don't spoil it all by sightseeing / too much time on feet in the last couple of days before the race, particularly the last 24 hours.
11. Pay attention to the conditions on the day. Reduce your starting pace if the weather is warmer than expected. Sticking to a pre-planned pace in warmer than expected conditions is one of the most common points of failure. In difficult conditions a decent controlled run is 100% better than a walk to the finish or a DNF.

John Danahay is the founder and head coach of High Performance Runner who provide information, insight and training advice (including individual coaching) for serious runners. He has been involved in the sport for more than 45 years, the last 16 years as a licenced UKA endurance coach. He has coached athletes to international level across track, road and trail, mountain running and cross country disciplines.