

Race preparation

Todmorden Harriers skills share Feb 2014

with Geoff Read: many thanks to all who attended and contributed ideas.

Assuming that you are well nourished, healthy and have done enough of the right kind of training to a plan, how do you prepare for key events and arrive on the start line fresh, focussed and raring to go so you can execute the best race you can?

Here are some aspects to consider:

(and see the handy table on short/medium/long race prep at bottom)

When not to race

Never race when ill, especially with chest infections. It is very unlikely you will have a good run, and it will delay your recovery. Dropping out when there is something wrong is clearly the best thing to do – there is toughness, and then there is plain stupidity! If you are new to running have a medical check: racing makes a lot of demands on your body compared to just going for a run – and it is a good idea to get checked out every year or two as you get older, too.

Recces and navigation preparation

Route recces are invaluable for pacing, navigation and shoe/equipment choice and essential to do well in medium and especially long races. Take your time and spend time on problem sections, going up and down trying different routes if necessary and noting useful markers and features. Recceing in mist is good navigation practice, but not nearly as useful as a clear day when you can see and understand the shape of the land.

Preparation races

It is impossible to race well every time, and most people race too often and rest too little to ever achieve their optimum performance – especially fell runners! However for short races and to an extent medium distances it is better to do a couple of practice races first to get used to the intensity of competition and to learn how to pace yourself, as long as they are not too near the key event. Usually it isn't necessary to reduce training for these races otherwise your season will be all tapering and not enough training, so they are sometimes called 'train through' races. The when you do taper for a key race you have more chance of flying! Because of the demanding nature of long races and the length of recovery after them it is hard to race well at long distance more than 2 – 4 times through the year, and prep races are not needed in the same way: they can tire you too much. Short and medium races are also good prep for long races, as long as you have done the longer distances in training, and again they should not be too close to allow recovery for the key event. See table below for suggested number and timing of preparation races.

Tapering

Tapering, that is, reducing training amount (but retaining some intensity until the last few days to keep feeling sharp), is fundamental to doing your best in key races. How much tapering for each type of event suits you varies from person to person, but the mistake most people make (sometimes for their whole career!) is trying to race when tired. It can be done, but you won't reach your full potential. See table below for suggestions for different distances.

<http://www.runnersworld.com/race-training/tapering-optimal-race-performance>

Sleep

Lack of sleep, both in general and before events has been shown to damage performance:

<http://sportsmedicine.about.com/od/anatomyandphysiology/a/Athletes-Sleep.htm>

It can be hard to sleep when keyed up for an event, especially the night before, so make sure you give yourself the best chance to sleep well, especially for the week before events. Avoid caffeine and sugar in the evening, don't eat after 9pm, dim the lights for the hour before going to bed, use black-out curtains and make sure your race focus doesn't go OTT – running is for fun after all.

Sleep strategies for athletes:

<http://www.webmd.com/sleep-disorders/features/sleep-like-an-olympian>

Logistics

Research route to the race and leave early to allow for traffic problems. Prepare your equipment, food, hydration, map and bearings, safety pins, pen etc. at least the night before leaving. Take different shoe and clothing options with you in case conditions change. Arrive early – at least an hour before to allow for parking, queues at registration and toilets, a walk to the start, kit check etc. For short races arriving in time to walk the course, or at least the finish, is useful. If you blow all that training and hard work because of some dumb practical mistake you will feel a right numpty and your only reward will be toilet seat points from Uncle Barry!

Mental approach

Racing well requires mental, as well as physical preparation and strength. Wikipedia identifies 4 main technique areas:

- Arousal regulation (oo-er missus)
- Goal setting
- Imagery
- Pre-performance routines
- Self talk

See: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sports_psychology#Commonly_used_techniques

Here are some more ideas:

- Have a goal that stretches you but is realistic
- Focused and relaxed concentration throughout event
- Confidence: don't listen to the 'negative voice in your head'
- Trust your training
- Run to succeed not to avoid failure
- Remember, if you are hurting others probably are too, even if they don't look like it
- Imagine and mentally run yourself through the race in the days before
- Use positive self-talk: but probably not out loud...
- Ego-focus can be negative, where it is about justifying or proving yourself: a performance focus, where it is about the pleasure of feeling your body working as it should and reaching your goal is more positive
- Be 'centred': don't give energy to worrying about others
- If you lose concentration or make a navigation mistake re-set and re-focus
- Avoid compulsive training / racing addiction and self-punishment for perceived failures. There are times when doing nothing (cancelling or dropping out) will get you fitter: be kind to yourself
- Don't take it too seriously – it is only sport!

Some more strategies:

<http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/the-winners-brain/201004/8-can-t-miss-boston-marathon-brain-strategies>

<http://www.runnersworld.com/running-times-sport-psychology>

Warm-up

Cold, stiff muscles don't work well, so some sort of warm-up is essential for avoiding injury and getting a good result. The aim is to raise the body and muscle temperature, get heart and lungs ready for being worked hard, and to get muscle

fibres ready for work. It also helps you get your race head on. Heavy static stretching before races is now discouraged, with some studies showing that heavy stretching is harmful before events – stretching should be done in a controlled way separately as part of training programmes. Light, very gentle stretching of all parts of the body after muscles are warm is safer. Typically this might involve:

1. Average runners: 10-15 minutes jogging; elite runners 20-25 minutes jogging
2. Dynamic loosening / light stretching
3. Strides (pops, pickups) 4 or 5 x 50 metres at race pace on the flat
4. Keep loose until the start

Keep wrapped up until close to the start, especially for short races, when it is good to start with a bit of a sweat on. Aim to finish just in time to get your extra clothes off and get to the start. For long races the strides can be omitted for the average runner. *See table below for suggestions for different lengths of event.*

Pacing

There are three basic pacing methods regardless of the length of event:

- **Pacing by feel:** if you know your body and what your body is able to do, this is probably the method used by the most successful athletes, even if they are aware of split times and other runners.
- **Pacing by time:** this is simpler in track and road events, but you may have guide times for checkpoints or features in fell races. It is the classic approach for marathon runners, but not all use it.
- **Pacing from others:** sticking with runners you know should be going at your pace – this is a useful guide, but it can mean you hold yourself back from your best performance because you ‘know your place’, or because they are having a bad day.

Evens: A theoretical ideal is to aim for an even energy output (cyclists can do this with power metres to show wattage live – runners can’t), however in practice it will vary depending on factors including nutrition, morale, focus; and in fell running the steepness and roughness of terrain. Most people inevitably slow down in the last third.

Faster 2nd half: A common approach is to aim for ‘**negative splits,**’ which means running the second half faster than the first on purpose. This usually works well and also feels much more positive as you are passing others rather than being passed as the race goes on – but it requires judgement to know when and where to press on harder.

Going off hard: Sometimes it is good to try and set off more positively when you feel that your training justifies it, especially with very short races where there are no second bites at the apple. The majority of races are won from a group at the front, but it also happens that winners pull through from 10th or so, especially if they are exceptionally strong finishers or descenders, like Ian Holmes.

Recovery

After race hard training should be avoided until you feel you have fully recovered, otherwise you will delay the next good race you can have. One day’s recovery for every mile raced is sometimes suggested as a guide, so it is unlikely you can race well again until at least 3 weeks after a long race, and usually longer. Carbs and protein should be replenished in the first hour after a race if your stomach can take it, as that is when muscles can replenish glycogen most efficiently. Iced-bath water (or a dip in a cold beck or lake) after races aids leg muscle fibre recovery by reducing inflammation. Gentle non-load-bearing cross-training aids recovery and the variety avoids you getting jaded. If your legs are still hurting, you feel mentally or physically exhausted, or your resting heart rate in the morning is elevated by around 10 bpm, it is too soon to start training hard. Avoid racing until you feel fresh again, otherwise you will further delay your recovery.

Good luck! Geoff (table on next page)

Preparing for and recovering from key target races

	Short	Medium	Long
Prep races <i>Little or no taper, expect a lower result than for key race, cycle there and back if near enough</i>	2 short 'train through' races, last not nearer than 7 days. Long and medium races will not help your speed and are likely to slow you down.	One medium <u>not nearer</u> than three weeks, but perhaps 2 or 3 short races are safer, the last not nearer than 7 days	<u>Not needed</u> if you have trained over equivalent distance and terrain – <u>recce much more important</u> . If doing long races avoid nearer than 6 weeks before. If medium, not nearer than three weeks. If short races not nearer than two weeks before.
Recce <i>For navigation, pacing and race / nutrition / hydration plan, conditioning to ground, shoe and equipment choice, confidence and focus. Take time to look and compare routes – don't rush</i>	Advised – can be walked the day before or on race day for very short races. Looking at good lines and the finish can make a big difference	<u>Essential</u> - concentrate on key navigation / route choice points. Can be weekend before if at gentle pace.	<u>Essential</u> – more than once if time allows, second half only if time is short. Spend time, repeating key sections if practical. Not nearer than two weeks before.
Taper for key races <i>Remember to reduce after heavy load period for at least two weeks to allow training effect to come through. Keep some intensity but reduce distance / climb</i>	7 days at 60 – 80% if heavy load has already been reduced for two weeks. Last speedwork not nearer than 4 days. Avoid hill-reps	7-10 days, last week at 50%, last speedwork not nearer than 4 days, no efforts more than 2 hours weekend before	3 weeks: e.g. 80%, 50% & 25% of usual distance, last big run 2 weeks before, no efforts more than 2 hours weekend before
Rest before race <i>It is essential to avoid arriving at the start line already tired. You can't get fitter by training in the last week, only more tired</i>	Last 1 or 2 days short jog with 'pops' to elevate heart rate and breathing briefly, or rest. Self-massage / foam roller	Last 3 or 4 days jogging only, nothing the day before. Self-massage / foam roller	No efforts in last week, last 3 or 4 days jogging with 'pops', last two days nothing. Self-massage / foam roller
Mental prep	It is going to hurt (a lot) for a short time. Picture your pace and form over the course. Today can be your day: intense focus	Look at the map a lot the week before. Run the race in your head, thinking about where the main efforts / climbs will be. Plan to maintain focus as you tire.	Trust your training. Look at the map and picture your run and pace. Where will you hold back until? What is the crux of the race?
Pre-race and during race nutrition <i>Always test nutrition and hydration choices in training or minor races, never use them for the first time in a key race. GI+ glycogen index: the speed at which your muscles will be fuelled after eating. High GI is quick release, low GI is slow release – search for list of foods. Little and often is best during events</i>	Avoid heavy meals for the 2 days before. Light breakfast (low GI) <u>at least</u> 3 hours before race, hydrate well (before last 90 minutes to allow bladder to empty) (closer on hot days). No sugary foods before race to avoid 'high then low' effect. No food or drink should be needed in event if you get prep right	Higher proportion of carbohydrate day before, good (low GI) breakfast <u>at least two hours before</u> , avoid high GI snacks before the race, hydrate well up to an hour before (closer on hot days). During race: eat after 60-90 mins on bottom of uphill	'Carbo load' for 3 days, ie. Higher proportion of carbohydrate, good (low GI) breakfast at least two hours before, avoid high GI foods before the race, hydrate well up to 45mins before (closer on hot days) During race: eat and drink little and often, usually after 60-90 minutes and <u>at least</u> every 60 minutes after that
Warm-up <i>Tailor to your fitness level. Flat warm-ups preserve your energy, if on fell to acclimatise go easy.</i>	<u>Essential</u> : 15 minute jog (Well wrapped up until last few minutes to keep muscles warm), with 5 short strides or 'pops' on flat to elevate heart rate and breathing	10 minute jog on flat, 3 'pops' to elevate heart and breathing rate, light stretching if any	10 minute jog on flat, light stretching if any
Warm-down & post-race <i>Tailor to your fitness level</i>	10-15 minute jog Hydrate + carbohydrate in first 30 mins	Short jog / walk/ easy cycle / swim Hydrate + carbohydrate/protein in first 30 mins	Easy cycle / swim -after hard events next day is more practical. Hydrate + carbohydrate/protein in first 30 mins
Recovery <i>Approx. 1 day for every mile raced before you are likely to be able to train or race hard without delaying your recovery</i>	Rest or low-impact gentle cross training: 1-2 days. Self-massage / foam roller <u>Overall recovery: 1-2 weeks</u>	Rest or low-impact gentle cross training: 2-4 days. Self-massage / foam roller <u>Overall recovery: 2-4 weeks</u>	Rest or low-impact gentle cross training: 3-7 days. Self-massage / foam roller <u>Overall recovery: 3-6 weeks</u>