

Minimalist MARATHON Program:

By Steve Manning

PART 3: COMPETITIVE PHASE

By the time you reach the last three weeks of the program you should be well prepared to finish a marathon. All of the hard training has been completed and you are now fully focused on getting ready for the big day.

The three week competitive phase aims to peak your fitness and performance for race day. This peaking involves two main components of tapering and sharpening.

Tapering is simply the reduction in the total weekly mileage. Some sessions are dropped, and the distance of each session is reduced. The main goal of tapering is to increase your ability to recover by decreasing the training load. If you are well rested you will be able to cope better with a marathon effort.

Sharpening is the increase in total intensity of the week. Because you are tapering you can increase your training intensity without a subsequent increase in stress. This sharpening gives you the edge that will spur you on to a supreme performance. It helps your body know that a hard effort is not far off.

LONG RUNS

The final long run is the day before this phase starts. Once you have entered the last three weeks no amount of mileage or long runs will help you get any fitter. It takes awhile for you to absorb any training and get the benefit from it. Less than three weeks is not long enough to improve your fitness after a long run. In fact any mileage you attempt will detract from your ability to run a good marathon.

Do not make the mistake of thinking you are underdone and that one more long run can pull you through. Doing a long run in the competitive phase will prevent your taper from happening and interrupt your sharpening. People who try a long run two weeks out usually find that they have run better in this final long run than they do in the race itself.

RACES

Besides the marathon, the only other race is a 10km race two to three weeks out from the marathon. This 10km has the very important role as a final predictor race of a realistic time to aim for in the marathon.

To work out a realistic time for the marathon take your 10km time and multiply it by 4.66. This will give you the best time that you can expect if conditions are good and you have a good day.

Because you have been following a minimalist training program your goal should be trying to finish comfortably rather than trying to run your best time. You do not have to slow down much to make the race much easier. Multiply your predicted time by 1.05 to give you an easy buffer that should make it much easier to finish comfortably. If you go for a time that is too slow you may find that it is actually harder to run consistently the whole way.

An example of calculating your time could be running 50 minutes for the 10km, multiplied by 4.66 gives you 233 minutes, multiplied by 1.05 equals about 245 minutes or four hours and five minutes.

SPEEDWORK

Speed sessions are the key component of successful peaking. They direct your physical fitness while getting the competitive juices flowing. Much of your confidence on race day can be drawn from running faster than ever in these sessions.

The major change in the competitive phase is that you will be running the sessions much harder and faster. Other changes are increasing the recovery between repetitions and decreasing the number of repetitions.

Week 3: 8 to 10 x 500M Accelerations, 500 recovery

Acceleration sessions are where you gradually pick up the pace through each repetition. The final time of each repetition is not so important, and it is not necessary that the reps themselves get quicker through the session.

This session should have you running the last 100 metres at the sort of pace that you would run while kicking in to the finish of a 10km race. The first 100 metres should be at about 10km pace with the pace increasing every 100 metres. You should finish this session feeling like you have a bit of zip in your stride.

This will be the easiest speed session you have run for months and you should finish thinking you could have done more reps and run faster. Make sure that the recoveries are easy and give yourself an extra minute if you need it.

Week 2: Power Session 3 x 1km maximum recovery

You rarely run power sessions but they are often the runs that become the most memorable of the whole training program. After the many weeks of hard slog and tough sessions you have a feel for what is the sort of time you can run for a kilometre.

This session stands out because of the surprise you get at how much faster you can really run. In essence that is the power of this session - to give you the confidence, strength and courage to run a great marathon. It opens your eyes to the possibilities and opportunities that await you on race day. When it starts to get hard in the marathon you can remember what you have done in this session and keep focused.

You must not start the session with the idea of running as hard as you can for every kilometre. It is still a goal to run the first repetition the slowest and the last one the fastest. The difference is that all the repetitions are much faster than you have run before.

The recovery should be a minimum five minutes between the first two kilometres and eight minutes before the last repetition. It is a good idea to walk around and stretch during the recovery, so that you do not get stiff or cool down too much. Give yourself some extra warm-up with more stretches for the upper body.

Week 1: 3 x 1km at Race Pace.

The power session the week before should be your last really intense session. After that everything is geared toward running at race pace. This session is

actually heaps of fun to do with a group to see who has the best pace judgement.

The idea is to figure out what pace you want to run for the marathon and try to run that time exactly. Do not look at your watch while you are running, instead focus on the rhythm of your pace and your perceived effort. After you finish guess what time you think you ran before you look at your watch. Doing this helps you develop pace judgement for your race pace.

In this session too fast is just as bad as too slow. Add up how far away from your goal time you ran for each repetition. Whoever has the smallest variance at the end is the best at pace judgement. Usually the first repetition is too fast.

This can be a good warning to runners about how to run the first kilometre in the marathon. You can blow your chances of running a comfortable marathon just by doing the first kilometre too fast. A 30 second per kilometre difference in race pace is equal to a 20 minute difference in time over a marathon.

RACE PACE TRAINING

With the taper the length of this session drops back to 15km in week three. In the last two weeks it drops even further to 10km. Do not think because the distance is decreasing that you can pick up the pace. This session is about learning race pace and if you run faster than you can not learn pace judgement. In the final week you should pick it up in the last kilometre.

RECOVERY RUNS

One of the ways that mileage is decreased in the competitive phase is by dropping the recovery runs from the program. The one exception is a run the day before the marathon. This run should be between three and five kilometres and should include some surges or strides at race pace over 60 to 80 metres. The purpose of this session is to work out any aches and strains so that you do not carry them into the marathon. Some good stretching of major muscle groups rounds off the session so that you will be physically ready for the race.

ULTRAMARATHON TRAINING

Ultramarathons need just as much taper as Marathons. The longer the distance of the race the more taper is required. The longest long run should be in week five rather than week four. The last three weeks vary only in the respect that the Thursday pace sessions are about five to ten kilometres longer as is the Sunday session in week two. Ultramarathoners may also like to make the Tuesday paced session over two kilometre repetitions rather than one.

NUTRITION

The tendency in the last few weeks is to continue eating the same amount as you did during the preparation phase. As the training load decreases during the taper your metabolic demands also decrease. If you do not control your intake slightly you will gain weight and run slower because of it. This does not mean you should be fasting or go hungry. Try to eat smaller amounts more frequently.

One major component of nutrition is proper hydration. You can not build up your glycogen reserves if you are suffering from chronic dehydration. In the

last week it is a good idea to make sure you drink a certain amount of fluids each day.

In the last two days try to increase the amount of carbohydrates in your diet. You should also decrease the amount of fibre you eat. This fortunate combination can be very tasty but remember that many sweets also have excess amounts of fat so lay off the cream and custard Danishes. Make sure that you are not hungry in the last two days as this will lead to depletion of your precious glycogen stores.

RACE TACTICS

Racing a marathon is all about pace judgement. If you run too fast the first few kilometres you may not pay until 30km but it will certainly catch up with you. It is much better to run too slow at the start than too fast. Initial speed leads to greater consumption of glycogen and 'the wall'. While it is hard to pick up the pace at the end of a marathon, it is impossible to protect a cushion by running faster at the start. Starting fast will always give you a slower marathon than what you could have run. The way to run your best time is to run as even a pace as possible.

Contingency plans should be made in case you encounter problems. If the conditions are very bad you should revise your goal time and pace. Injury or illness should make you consider not running. The forfeit of a race entry fee is a small amount to pay for continued good health. For your entry you could have two physio visits or miss a few hours of work. Running when sick can lead to permanent damage that could stop you from ever running again. Carrying an injury into a long race can lead to a much more severe injury that takes months or years to recover. I know many people in this condition. One race is not worth it. Save your fitness and health for another day.

Marathon running is more a test of survival than a competition. Your fellow runners are there to share the experience. Together you help each other run through the early stages until attrition starts to set in after half way. It is not about beating others. It is about conquering yourself. Group power gives you the adrenaline and strength to keep going as you start to struggle. Marathons can be very emotional experiences because you must draw deeply in order to succeed. These situations are often more enjoyable when shared.

Ultramarathon racing takes the survival aspect and makes it the prime objective. Regular walking breaks may help some people go the distance. Nutritional supplements like gels and GU's can be vital to finishing as your body will certainly not carry enough glycogen stores for ultramarathon distances. It is almost a given that you will go through bad patches and struggle. Knowing that you should feel better in another five or ten kilometres can be helpful.

The Canberra marathon has a 50km event with it. Many people will be able to run this distance as if it is a marathon. Doing the 'Lest we forget' double marathon in Brisbane will take a little more perseverance. To be successful at ultramarathons mainly takes a strong will and high pain tolerance. If you are mentally prepared for the difficulties you will face then you should make the finish.

Now that the training is over it is time to enjoy the race. I hope you have found these programs useful. I would be grateful if you could let me know how you have gone in your training and racing. Please email me at

footman@intraining.com.au with your experiences. Good Luck and remember to smile at the finish.

The next phase involves recovery from the marathon. The importance of the recovery phase of training is often unappreciated leading to staleness, injury illness and even depression. By training properly after the marathon you can gain the fitness benefits from having completed such a hard long run.

FIRST-TIME MARATHONER

Phase 3: Competition

Week	TYPE	Tues	Thurs	Saturday	Sunday
3	SHARPENING	8 x 500M ACC, 500 rec	Steady 10km	OFF	Race 10km Predictor
2	SHARPENING	Power 3 x 1km, max rec	10km TT	OFF	Easy 15km
1	PEAKING	3 x 1km easy, 1km rec	Steady 10km	Easy 5km	Race Marathon

EXPERIENCED MARATHONER

Phase 3: Competition

Week	TYPE	Tues	Thurs	Saturday	Sunday
3	SHARPENING	10 x 500M ACC, 500 rec	Steady 15km	OFF	Race 10km Predictor
2	SHARPENING	Power 3 x 1km, max rec	10km TT	OFF	Easy 15km
1	PEAKING	3 x 1km easy, 1km rec	Steady 15km	Easy 5km	Race Marathon

Steve Manning writes the footman column for Runners World. He is aiming for his 20th marathon next year and has a personal best of 2:33.