

The Path to Marathon Success

by Benji Durden

This 15-week training program will lead you to your best marathon ever

It's ironic that I became a world-class marathoner and now, a marathon coach, because I used to think all marathoners were nuts. As a so-so collegiate miler, I thought that 10 miles was an ultradistance--and 26 miles was unthinkable.

But times change, and I changed my mind enough to try running the '74 Peach Bowl Marathon in Atlanta. After I dropped out, I told my friends, "Anyone who runs a marathon is sick."

Sick or not, I returned to Peach Bowl the next year, convinced that this time I was ready not only to finish but to break 2:23 and qualify for the '76 Olympic Trials. I finished but ran 2:36 and didn't qualify on my next attempt, either.

But I was determined to do it right. When I started the '76 Rice Festival Marathon, I had finally trained differently for it by doing more long runs. I started the race cautiously, gradually moved through the pack and surprised everyone--including myself--by finishing second in 2:20:23.

I was a marathoner after all.

Since those early days, I've learned a lot about training for and racing the marathon and eventually ran 2:09:58 in 1983. The most important lesson I learned is that there are no simple recipes for training successfully for a marathon. Part of the marathon's allure is that it's difficult--not only to race but to train for properly.

Over a period of years, I developed basic guidelines about marathon training that have worked for me. I didn't have great speed, but I knew how to get ready for a marathon by following a well-conceived plan.

As I have moved from competing to coaching, I have successfully applied these same rules to training programs for a wide range of runners, from 2:26 marathoner Kim Jones to recreational runners who have never run a marathon and just want to finish.

Using formulas developed by Jack Daniels, Ph.D., an exercise physiologist and a respected coach, I have devised an approach that uses recent race times to adjust the basic structure of my program for specific ability levels.

For the program I will detail, I've made a few assumptions. First, this is a 15-week training plan, so if your marathon is next month, forget it. This schedule won't work for you. Second, you should be comfortably able to complete a 1- to 2-hour run on a weekly to biweekly basis. You also should be able to run 60 minutes or better for a 10-K. While it's possible you could make it through the program without meeting these criteria, wait until you're at least able to complete the long run. Otherwise, the program will be harder than it should be.

Chart 1 (below) gives you the basic training schedule. Each week consists of four parts: a long run, a speed or strength run, a pace or tempo run and four optional easy runs. About every third week, the long run is replaced by a race. Before you turn to the chart, let's look at the various elements of the marathon training plan. Chart 1:Basic 15-week Marathon Training Program

	Sun	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri	Sat
	*Long	Easy	Hills/Track	Easy	**Tempo	Easy	Easy
Week 1	2:00 plus adjustment	30-40	20 wup/wdn; 6 hills	30-40	20 wup/wdn; 2 (8t/2e)	30-40	30-40
Week 2	2:15 plus adjustment	30-40	20 wup/wdn; 7 hills	30-40	20 wup/wdn; 3 (5t/1e)	30-40	30-40

Week 3	5-K to 10-K race	30-40	20 wup/wdn; 8 hills	30-40	20 wup/wdn; 2 (9t/2e)	30-40	30-40
Week 4	2:20 plus adjustment	30-40	22 wup/wdn; 7 hills	30-40	22 wup/wdn; 3 (6t/2e)	30-40	30-40
Week 5	2:40 plus adjustment	30-40	22 wup/wdn; 8 hills	30-40	22 wup/wdn; 4 (5t/1e)	30-40	30-40
Week 6	10-K to 15-K race	30-40	22 wup/wdn; 9 hills	30-40	22 wup/wdn; 2 (12t/3e)	30-40	30-40
Week 7	2:50 plus adjustment	30-40	25 wup/wdn; 6 x 800	30-40	25 wup/wdn; 3 (8t/2e)	30-40	30-40
Week 8	3:00 plus adjustment	30-40	25 wup/wdn; 7 x 800	30-40	25 wup/wdn; 4 (5t/1e)	30-40	30-40
Week 9	8-K to 10-K race	30-40	25 wup/wdn; 8 x 800	30-40	25 wup/wdn; 3 (9t/2e)	30-40	30-40
Week 10	2:45 plus adjustment	30-40	25 wup/wdn; 7 x 800	30-40	25 wup/wdn; 3 (5t/1e)	30-40	30-40
Week 11	15-K to half-marathon	30-40	28 wup/wdn; 8 x 800	30-40	28 wup/wdn; 2 (15t/4e)	30-40	30-40
Week 12	3:00	30-40	28 wup/wdn; 9 x 800	30-40	28 wup/wdn; 4 (7t/2e)	30-40	30-40
Week 13	2:30	30-40	28 wup/wdn; 8 x 800	30-40	28 wup/wdn; 3 (9t/2e)	30-40	30-40
Week 14	2:00	30-40	45	1:30	30-40	30-40	25
Week 15	Marathon	Rest	Rest	Rest	Rest		

Note: All workouts are given in hours and minutes. *If you want to increase the length of your long runs, see Chart 3. **See text for a complete explanation of tempo-run workouts.

The Value of Rest

Here's a shocker. The most important days in this schedule aren't the hard days, but the four easy ones per week, scheduled for Mondays, Wednesdays, Fridays and Saturdays. Easy days are critical because they allow the body to recover from and adapt to the hard training done during the rest of the week. Without easy days or days off between the hard workouts, the training will break you down rather than make you stronger.

Rest, or easy days, are the most overlooked part of many programs. Typically, runners are reluctant to rest enough between hard workouts because they worry about losing ground. I was a perfect example of this during the early days of my career. I knew about former University of Oregon coach Bill Bowerman's hard day/easy day philosophy, but I thought "easy" meant not doing speedwork. To me, "easy" was still doing two 6-mile runs a day.

After injuring my right knee, I rested for a month. When I returned to training, my knee pain kept flaring up. By trial and error, I discovered that I could train one day and if I didn't run the next, the knee pain wasn't a problem. Eventually I began to run on the easy days, but the runs were gentle and no longer than 40 minutes. My knee didn't bother me again, and that spring, I ran the '78 Boston Marathon in 2:15:04, a 4-minute PR.

Notice on Chart 1 that easy days are 30- to 40-minute runs. Limiting easy days to just that length is vital to allow adaptation to the hard work that you'll be doing the other three days of the week. Resist the temptation to go longer or faster on these days.

Chart 2: Workout Paces Based On A Recent 10-K

10-K Time	Easy Run	Long Run	Tempo Run	800 Repeats
32:00	7:13	6:42	5:20-5:23	2:25-2:35
33:00	7:26	6:54	5:29-5:33	2:30-2:40
34:00	7:39	7:06	5:39-5:43	2:34-2:45
35:00	7:52	7:22	5:48-5:54	2:38-2:50
36:00	8:05	7:35	5:58-6:04	2:43-2:55
37:00	8:18	7:48	6:07-6:14	2:47-3:00
38:00	8:30	8:01	6:17-6:25	2:51-3:05
39:00	8:43	8:14	6:26-6:35	2:56-3:10
40:00	8:56	8:27	6:35-6:45	3:00-3:15
41:00	9:09	8:40	6:45-6:56	3:04-3:20
42:00	9:21	8:52	6:54-7:06	3:08-3:24
43:00	9:34	9:05	7:04-7:16	3:13-3:29
44:00	9:47	9:18	7:13-7:26	3:17-3:34
45:00	9:59	9:31	7:22-7:37	3:21-3:39
46:00	10:12	9:44	7:31-7:47	3:25-3:44
47:00	10:24	9:56	7:41-7:57	3:30-3:49
48:00	10:37	10:09	7:50-8:07	3:34-3:54
49:00	10:49	10:22	7:59-8:17	3:38-3:59
50:00	11:02	10:35	8:08-8:28	3:42-4:04
51:00	11:14	10:47	8:18-8:38	3:46-4:09
52:00	11:27	11:00	8:27-8:48	3:51-4:13
53:00	11:39	11:12	8:36-8:58	3:55-4:18
54:00	11:51	11:25	8:45-9:08	3:59-4:23
55:00	12:04	11:38	8:54-9:18	4:03-4:28
56:00	12:16	11:50	9:03-9:28	4:07-4:33
57:00	12:28	12:03	9:12-9:38	4:11-4:37
58:00	12:41	12:15	9:21-9:48	4:15-4:42
59:00	12:53	12:27	9:30-9:58	4:19-4:47
60:00	13:05	12:40	9:39-10:08	4:24-4:52

If you aren't sure how fast you should go on an easy day, check Chart 2. For example, if you have been running around 48 minutes lately for 10-K (don't use your PR unless that is your most recent performance), Chart 2 suggests that your easy pace should range around 10:37 per mile. (Please note that for easy runs, I've given a suggested pace. It's fine if you are within plus or minus 20 to 40 seconds of that pace.) During your easy runs, check occasionally to see that your pace is comfortable and in the right range. If you err, err to the slow side. Easy days are optional. If you don't want to run because you're too tired or something comes up, don't run. At some point during any lengthy training program, the realities of a busy life are going to require skipping or postponing a hard day. That's fine as long as you resist the trap of trying to catch up by dropping the easy days to get in the hard ones. Just because the easy days are optional run days does not mean the rest/recovery can be skipped. If you miss a hard session, keep on schedule. You will still improve your fitness. But if you skip the easy/off days, you'll be more prone to injury. Easy days are also a good time for cross-training. Weight work, cross-country skiing or NordicTrack, brisk walks and swimming are all beneficial cross-training activities for marathoners. Just don't do too much. The idea is to recover on your easy days, not become more fatigued.

Run Long

In most marathon programs, the long runs are considered the key hard runs. These runs are essential because they allow your body to adapt to

the stresses of running the marathon distance. Covering the distance isn't the problem--most runners who can cover 10-K in under an hour should be able to walk or run 26.2 miles--but it's a question of how much stress your body can take--and for how long.

By starting with a long run that is only moderately challenging and gradually increasing the length, your body will adapt to running for longer and longer periods while still being able to recover sufficiently for the next hard workout.

While most marathon programs, and runners in general, measure long runs in distance covered (miles or kilometers), I prefer to specify the amount of time spent running. The body doesn't know how far it's running, but it understands effort for a given time. The reason I don't like running a known distance is because it encourages you to race a workout, either against your own standard or someone else. Nothing is more destructive than racing a long run.

Looking at [Chart 1](#), it may seem that the progression is difficult, but if you keep your pace close to that suggested in [Chart 2](#), which is 10:09 per mile (plus or minus 5 to 15 seconds) for our 48-minute 10-K runner, you should be able to manage the long run.

You also may think that the suggested time range for the long run is too slow. Similar to the easy run pace, resist the temptation to go faster. The main value of the long run in the marathon training program is to train your body to be more efficient at burning fat and sparing glycogen stores. If you can teach your body to burn fat, rather than depleting glycogen to produce energy, you're less likely to run out of fuel and hit the wall come marathon day. But the faster you go on your long runs, the less likely it is that your body will learn how to burn fat efficiently and the more likely it is that you will hit the wall in the marathon.

While it seems logical that the faster you are able to go on your long runs translates to a faster marathon, it's not true. Trust me on this. The important factor isn't the absolute speed of the run but the relative effort. The effort required to run 6:40 pace for a 32-minute 10-K runner should be similar to the effort required to run 10-minute pace for a 48-minute 10-K runner. The effort is fast enough to be challenging, but it's not too tough. Finally, by staying within the suggested pace for your long run, it will allow adequate recovery for the strength and speed sessions on Tuesdays.

Chart 3: Long-Run Adjustments

10-K time	Adjustment
<40:00	none
40:00	5:00
41:00	10:00
42:00	15:00
43:00	20:00
44:00	25:00
>44:00	30:00

Also notice that for most of the runs, I've included a time adjustment that can be found on [Chart 3](#). Our 48-minute runner, for example, can add 30 minutes to the time of the long run on the chart, which in Week 2 would yield a 2:45 long run. (After Week 10, you should not adjust the long runs, as you will be beginning a long taper into the marathon.) You may wonder why 10-K runners with times faster than 40 minutes have a zero adjust factor, and those slower than 44 have a 30-minute adjust factor to their long run. The adjustment is based on what I believe the maximum long run should be. Faster runners, likely to run a sub-3-hour marathon, should not run any longer than 3 hours. Slower runners need to train to be on their feet longer, up to 3 hours, but no longer, to avoid injury. One other important consideration is to make sure water is available at least every 15 to 30 minutes. Plan your long run carefully so it passes water fountains. Or carry a water bottle with you. If you don't want to lug a

bottle, stash some water along your loop the day before the long run so you can keep hydrated. Even if it's cool, drink as frequently as possible. You'll need to drink at every aid station in your marathon to maximize your performance, so practice this in training.

Races

The races that are scheduled for every third week of the program are almost as important as the long runs. It's been my experience that if I didn't race often enough before a marathon, I wouldn't feel "race fit" when I needed to. I was fit enough, but the shock of racing left me with dead legs way too early in the marathon. I knew this could be a problem going into the '80 Olympic Trials, so as part of my preparation I raced every week for 18 weeks.

Even though I had a race scheduled for the weekend, I still did my long runs every Thursday. Some of my races were good, but others reflected that I was still tired just a couple of days after a 2-hour run. But my goal was the race at the end of the plan--the Olympic Trials--not these "training" races. It must have worked because at the Marathon Trials, I ran a PR by 3 minutes to finish second and make the Olympic team.

That's why I believe that if you have to choose only two workouts to do other than easy runs, do a weekly long run and race often. Try not to become too concerned about your times at these races because you'll be fatigued from the hard training. The schedule is flexible. It doesn't have to be exactly a three-week cycle; you can swap a weekend race with a long run and be fine. But don't drop the long runs entirely in favor of racing because they're more important in the overall plan. If you have time during the week to do your long run, consider swapping Thursdays' workouts with Sundays' to get in a long run even when you have a race planned.

Tempo Runs

Thursday runs are tempo runs sandwiched between a warmup and warmdown. Look at the workout for Thursday in Week 1. The 20 wup/wdn; 2 (8t/2e) looks like a complicated algebraic formula, but it's simple. First, warm up at an easy pace for 20 minutes (20 wup). Then, run for 8 minutes at a fast pace (8t)--the actual tempo run. The speed should be approximately the pace you could maintain for an hour. (Chart 2 puts this range as 7:50 to 8:07 for our 48-minute 10-K runner.) This should be a fast effort but not exhausting. If it's too fast, back off. Follow the 8 minutes of fast running with 2 minutes at an easy pace, and then do another 8 minutes of tempo running. Finish the workout with a 20-minute warmdown (20 wdn).

If this is still unclear, look at the next week. For our 48-minute runner, the 20 wup/wdn; 3(5t/1e) means:

- warm up for 20 minutes at 10:02 to 11:11 pace per mile
- run 5 minutes at 7:50 to 8:07 pace per mile
- run 1 minute at 10:02 to 11:11 pace per mile
- run 5 minutes at 7:50 to 8:07 pace per mile
- run 1 minute at 10:02 to 11:11 pace per mile
- run 5 minutes at 7:50 to 8:07 pace per mile
- warm down 20 minutes at 10:02 to 11:11 pace per mile

Some runners like to run the tempo workouts continuously; a single 15-minute run, rather than three separate 5-minute runs. Do whatever feels comfortable. If you feel any inclination to do this workout on the track in the form of mile repeats, forget it. Mile repeats are often done too hard on the track to be useful for marathon training. By doing timed runs of 5 to 15 minutes on the road, you train on the surface on which you'll be racing and avoid the constant feedback you get on the track that might entice you to run too fast. The purpose of tempo work is to improve running efficiency for the marathon, not set a mile PR.

Hill Work

The schedule on Tuesdays calls for hill workouts, which are designed to

build muscular and cardiovascular strength in preparation for the faster training you'll do later on the track. This phase of hill runs lasts for six weeks. Ideally, the hill you choose for this workout should have about a 4 to 6 percent grade and take about 90 seconds to run. It's a good idea to find a hill that takes a bit longer than 90 seconds to run at first, since you'll get faster as you gain fitness.

For the first workout, warm up 20 minutes (20 wup/wdn) and then run uphill for 90 seconds at about the same effort as your tempo run pace. You should be breathless by the time you hit 90 seconds. When you've run for 90 seconds, notice where you are and jog back to where you started. Turn around and repeat the uphill run five times. If you started out at a reasonable effort, you should be able to get to the same spot or farther in 90 seconds on all six uphill runs. If you can't, start slower the next time you run hills. Follow the hill runs with a 20-minute warmdown (20 wup/wdn). Later in the schedule, the warm-up and warm-down times increase slightly.

If you live in a flat area of the country, don't despair. Improvise by running up a bridge, up a ramp to a multistory parking lot or on sand--any surface that takes extra effort and leaves you a little breathless after about 90 seconds. You can also run on a treadmill that has an adjustable incline feature. Kim Jones does nearly all of her hill workouts on her treadmill to eliminate the stress of running downhill.

Track Work or Repeats

After six weeks of hill work, you're ready to move to the track. The workouts are all 800-meter runs (two laps around a track) with 400-meter recovery jogs (one lap around a track). Check [Chart 2](#) for the times to shoot for. Our 48-minute runner should aim for 3:34 to 3:54 for the 800s. The 400 recovery jogs should be run at, or slower than, the easy run pace. The warm-up and warm-down times are 25 minutes at first, increasing to 28 minutes by the end of the program.

Consistent times are what to shoot for, rather than starting hard and finishing slow. If you can run all of your 800s within 5 seconds of each other, it's a much better workout than if you ran two 800s fast, but then have to slow down for the final ones.

If you don't have access to a track or if you simply prefer the roads, run for 3 minutes on the road at the 800-meter pace followed by a 2-minute recovery. Do the same number of 3-minute runs as the schedule calls for in 800-meter runs. For example, Week 8 calls for seven 800-meter runs, so instead do seven 3-minute runs.

If your training is going according to plan, you'll be racing faster as you work through the program. If you are a 48-minute 10-K runner and you improve your race times 30 to 40 seconds later in your training schedule, adjust your paces a bit. It takes a little math if you want to be precise in how much to move up in speed since 47:30 isn't on [Chart 2](#). But it isn't necessary to be that exact. There is some overlap between the low range of one performance level and the high range of the next.

If your training has gone well, your perceived effort for a given pace should become easier. Focus on effort level and move through the range of times for your recent racing efforts.

Marathon Week

Finally, the marathon is within sight. It's the last full week of training, and this one is different from all the preceding weeks. Your final serious hard training run should have ended with the tempo run the week before. From this point on, all runs should be done at an easy pace, including Sunday's 2-hour run and Wednesday's 1-hour run.

I know what you're thinking: Do a 1-hour run just a few days before the marathon? Exactly. But remember--this run is supposed to be extremely easy. It's not a run that has any important training purpose other than to deplete slightly your glycogen stores--the carbohydrates stored in your muscles that serve as the primary fuel for distance running. This is helpful

because if you can deplete your supply of glycogen, you can pack in more energy than normal when you begin loading with carbohydrates immediately after the run. The more energy (in the form of carbohydrates) you can store, the easier it will be to run the marathon. After the 1-hour run, rest as much as you can during the remaining days before the marathon--and have fun. You've earned it.

Drink as much as possible, especially when you start eating a high-carbohydrate diet. For every gram of carbohydrate your body stores, you need 2 grams of water. Expect to feel a little bloated as your body stores these extra carbohydrates and fluids.

During this last week, it will be difficult not to think about the marathon. But try to get as much sleep as you can. The night before the race you may have trouble sleeping, but you'll be fine if you have slept well the rest of the week.

Race Day

Assuming your marathon starts at mid-morning or earlier, eat very little if anything. If you drink coffee, drink less than normal. Some can help get your bowels moving, but too much can give you a sour stomach. Don't drink acidic fruit juices or milk. Even if it's a cold day, drink at least one quart of water in the last hour or 2 before the race. Don't bother with a warm-up run. A few strides and stretching should be enough. If you're too warm, you'll start too fast.

I have purposely not included a pace chart with times you should aim for because I feel you should listen to your body rather than watch your splits. Marathon courses are seldom uniform so that the same effort from one marathon to the next often won't produce the same splits. Additionally, even the best races may have a mile marker in the wrong place, which will throw off your splits. The effort to maintain splits often isn't worth it because you can get into a yo-yo mode of speeding up and slowing down trying to hit a preordained set of splits.

Instead, try for an effort level that is easier than the Thursday tempo runs. For at least the first 10 miles, try to maintain an effort that approximates the sense of being out for a fast long run without working or breathing hard. Notice your pace, but don't worry about hitting target splits exactly. Make certain you drink frequently.

The second 10 miles is transitional. Pay more attention to where you are in the race. Look for runners to catch; after all, this is a race. Between 15 and 18 miles, expect a few tough patches. Remind yourself that these will pass.

At 20 miles, shift your focus to racing; this is where you need to concentrate. But don't go nuts; the last 10 kilometers can seem never-ending if you push too hard. In this final part of the race, it may feel like you're exerting a lot more effort, but you're probably just maintaining the pace you had been running earlier. Whether you maintain or actually begin to run faster, think positively. Even if you are behind the pace you had hoped to run, you'll feel better about your race by finishing strongly rather than struggling to the finish line.

Postrace

Whatever the outcome, remember that each marathon teaches you something you can use the next time. If you reach your goals, set new goals and focus on what went right.

If you missed the mark, look for where you went off track. It took me a few attempts before I ran a marathon that reflected my talent. Most runners need a few marathons before they run up to their ability.

The week after the race, whether you reached your goal or not, take at least four days off completely. Marathons deplete the body's energy stores, and often there is muscle tissue damage, particularly from hilly courses. Allowing yourself total rest from training, combined with eating plenty of carbohydrates, helps the body rebuild.

When you start running again, ease into it with gentle 30- to 40-minute runs. If you still have mild aches, ice and aspirin can help. For severe soreness, rest until it passes. Patience now will be invaluable later as you begin to train again. Impatience can result in a long-term nagging problem.

As you go through the program, remember to enjoy your running. If it seems too much like work, you're probably trying too hard.