AFTER THE MARATHON
Planning for success post-race

JOHN SKEVINGTON - UKA L3 PERFORMANCE COACH
Leicestershire Vision 2020 Athletics Network

RECOVERY IS THE KEY

Probably the biggest mistake that marathon runners make is not taking enough recovery time after finishing their race. It may well be that following a great race which went either to plan or better, you will feel that you want to go out and take advantage of the fitness and "high" that you are feeling, or on the other hand if you have had a bad race that hasn't gone to plan that you may want to get back to training to redeem yourself. Either way after 26.2 miles of hard running, and probably months of training that went into performing at the race the body (and mind) needs a break.

Taking time off from running is quite alien to most runners and many fear that missing runs will dramatically diminish their fitness. Nothing in fact could be quite different to the truth.

It is assumed that you carried out and followed a, hopefully documented, (or how will you know what went wrong or right to build on for next time) plan to train for the race. It makes good sense in such case to make a post-race plan to recover and build upon the endurance fitness that you have.

The first part of this plan should beyond doubt to recover properly as muscles, tendons, ligaments, and almost every physiological system is challenged when running a marathon. Whether everything went to plan and you achieved your target or PB, or you struggled to the finish, however much you have trained - the marathon is a long way and your body has endured tremendous physical stress, even if you don't feel sore immediately afterwards.

So what is the damage?

Damage to calf muscles

The damage done to the calf muscles during a marathon is significant, training and running a marathon induces huge inflammation and death of muscle fibre and body tissue. This of course significantly reduces muscle power and resilience. In short your calf muscles will have been substantially weakened and will need sufficient recovery time to recover before resuming training. It makes sense surely to understand that running hard on weakened legs means that you will be engaging the wrong muscle groups and putting pressure on weakened tendons etc which could well cause severe injury or long term damage

Cellular Damage

Cellular damage post-marathon is best measured by the presence and production of something called creatinine kinase (CK) which indicates damage to skeletal and myocardial tissue and increased myoglobin levels in the blood stream. CK damage will continue for a week or more post-marathon and there will be a presence of myoglobin (Myoglobin is only found in the bloodstream after muscle injury) in the bloodstream for 3-4 days post-race. Both of the above clearly indicate that the body needs rest

after a marathon to fully recover from the physiological and cellular damage caused during the race. *It is also extremely important to remember that just because you don't feel soreness or undue tiredness that you have not incurred this damage, unlike muscle soreness, these indicators of hard training and racing aren't always noticeable so you should still look to take a break even if you don't feel soreness*

Immune System

It is generally accepted that your immune system will be severely compromised after running a race such as a marathon, this of course increases the risk of contracting colds, flu and other illnesses. Resuming training too soon after a marathon (or indeed over training) is a major cause of a suppressed immune system. In such case not taking sufficient rest post marathon could well lead to training being curtailed later on, which in turn will reduce your chances of hitting your post-race goals or targets.

Not taking enough time to fully recover after a marathon will inevitably lead to overtraining and injuries. Resting for 7-10 days after your race will have little adverse effect upon your current fitness and you can be assured that the long term gains outweigh any temporary loss of fitness in the short term.

The Science behind the logic

VO2 max is an individual's maximum ability to transport and use oxygen during exercise and is one of the best measurements of a runner's fitness and is most useful reference point to compare the effect of resting or not continuing to train your aerobic system.

Studies show that there is little reduction in VO2max (1-3%) in the first 6-7 days following inactivity in well-trained runners (which you will be of course after training for a marathon!) and even after two weeks of not running and no exercise, studies show that VO2 max decreases by only six percent. Whilst this seems alarming for some, this fitness can be regained or even exceeded in just a few weeks as your body will be now capable of coping with the stresses placed on it again.

What do the Elite do?

Paul Evans who was a prolific marathon runner(PB 2.08.52 and 4th fastest Brit of all time) in the 1980s always advocated taking a complete rest for a month after the rigours of running a marathon – he was always able to come back stronger afterwards, those runners that are at the front of the big races such as London and whose living generally depends on running fast and doing well in big city marathons will inevitably be taking extended rest breaks after their races – if it works for them then why not for you????

HOW DID YOUR RACE GO?

Post-race you will inevitably be reflecting on how things went and everyone's emotions will be varying vastly after the big race day. So what are your options post-race?

"I had a great race and a PB!"

It is quite common to come off of a marathon having done really well to believe that you have a great springboard to immediately go out and run quickly again, after absorbing the above it is hoped that you can put a lid on this and take a reasonable recovery period to allow your body to re-build itself after your exertions. You have a huge endurance base which won't diminish for some time so this may well be the time to set out a plan for the coming months and how to utilise this. A goal is as ever the key so pick something, say, 8- 10 weeks in the future and work towards that goal by working on reducing your mileage and concentrating on your speed and form, this is also a time to also look long term if you are hoping to run a second marathon later in the year. You have a great endurance base which won't go away, its stands to reason that by adding a speed base to your armoury that this will then become a great progressive building block for when you start to train for your next marathon.

"My race was "OK" / a disaster "

Often the most difficult type of marathon to bounce back from are the "OK" ones. You're not too disappointed because you didn't run too badly, but you also didn't run as well as you expected to, so you can't be pleased either. You may experience a similar need to get out and prove to yourself and to everyone else that you can do what you planned. Remember firstly that just like after a good race, you still need to take the time to recover if you want to make continual gains in your running.

You are still fit and have an endurance base so recover properly and follow the advice above –make a plan and indeed go out and redeem yourself but "hurry slowly" back.

For both of the above scenarios it is important that you have kept detailed plans of how you arrived at the marathon start, if you did well you need to look at ways that you can repeat this with progressions so that you can improve again next time, if things didn't go so well you firstly need to reflect on what happened, did you do enough training, did you have a plan?

Were there things outside of your control that affected your race? Pre-race, what affected your preparation? Family issues, work, accidents such as twisted ankle etc, not enough planning for the longer runs, unavoidable illness or injury? All of these could have had an effect upon your training and led to going into the race less than properly prepared and were probably outside of your control. It may well be that you will just have to learn from this and bounce back fully prepared next time. Write down your factors and see how these can be negated next time round.

So what about those things that you were within your control? illness or injury that affected your training? (See above about overtraining). Refer to your plan – did you stick to it? Was it realistic? Did your times for other distances indicate that you should have been able to achieve your predicted time? You need to now reflect over your training and see what needs to be done differently for next time, the two main things to remember though if you have had a bad or indifferent race (or indeed a great one) is that training is never wasted and doesn't exist for that one race. After proper recovery you can build from all of that endurance and by planning effectively can utilise the hard work and training that you have put in to take you to a great post marathon season.

However your race went, you are a better runner for the experience so ensure that you can now plan to build on the fitness that you have! **BUT REST AND RECOVER BEFORE YOU DO SO!**

Leicestershire
Vision 2020
Athletics Network