

Going The Distance

With the 2015 Dubai Marathon fast approaching (23 January—mark your diaries!) it's time to get your training schedule in order. Our expert's guide to getting in shape and staying the distance will help you run the greatest race of your life

By Hannah Bass



So you've signed up and there's no getting out of it now: in mere months you will be running a whopping 26 miles. Time to hang up your calendar and start pencilling in a schedule. "Running the marathon is all in the training," says Anna Bartlett, a personal trainer for TechnoGym. "Put in the work and you'll see results, but you'll never be able to just get away with it." Anna runs at least six or seven half- and full marathons a year and has trained countless athletes to do the same.

She advocates an "earlier the better" approach to training—"The more time you have to gradually build up your distances, the more time your body has to adjust and the less likely you are to encounter injuries"—but she believes 12-16 weeks is the optimum preparation period for runners already up to a 10k standard. "You've got to commit yourself to a set timeframe," she

says. "You could train half-heartedly over a year but if you know you've got just 16 weeks, you'll get it done."

So you've got your timeframe: Now to map out a plan of attack. Your schedule will depend on your current level of fitness and ability and how many times you can afford to train a week, but the basic principle is to mix middle distance runs with interval

training during the week and a longer run on the weekends. So you might run six miles on Tuesdays and Fridays, sprint intervals on a Wednesday and go out on a longer run—starting at 10 miles—on Sundays.

"Your shorter runs should be done as fast as you can, focusing on gradually getting your speed up," says Anna. She recommends starting at

six miles and building it up to about eight, but never more than 10. This is when you need to figure out your pacing. Get yourself a watch and start timing your miles, then work out an achievable target time to complete at a comfortable speed for you. Remember, with a marathon you're in it for the long haul so you don't want to burn out—experts recommend aiming for a speed at which



you could just about hold a conversation, albeit one with short sentences!

On your longer runs, don't stress about your speed—"It's just about getting used to spending that time on your feet," says Anna. Start at 10 miles and build your way up to one 20 mile slog a month before the race.

Even though you're training for the long distance, don't be tempted to neglect strength and speed work—"You'll never get faster if you just run the same long distance every day," says Anna. Aim for a weekly sprint session (try five 800 metre sprints with the focus on speed) and then hit the weights room for core and leg work. "Strength training will help you to avoid injury," Anna advises. "The stronger you are, the less strain you'll put your body under. Aim for lower resistance and higher repetitions, simulating the effect of the marathon."

If It Ain't Broke

Training is also when you find out what works for your body, whether that's trying out every brand of pasta under the sun or wearing in a pair of blister-free trainers.

"When it comes to nutrition, everyone is different so you need to figure out what suits you," says Anna. "Your longer runs in particular are the time to start trying different foods so you know what gives you enough energy without any kind of tummy upset or sluggish feeling." You'll also need to decide what you're going to eat during the race itself. Risk grabbing the packs of energy beans or gels given out on marathon day and you might find yourself with a mid-race tummy ache if it's a new brand. "Never try anything new on race day," warns Anna; "stick to a tried and tested formula." That goes for your kit, too—it might be tempting to splash out on brand new gear for the big day but it's better to run in your comfy

old top and trainers to avoid nasty surprises like chafing or blistering.

The Final Countdown

You should set out on your longest training run four weeks before the race, to give your body time to recover. And don't set out to run the entire stretch—most experts recommend no more than 20 miles. "It's not important to practise the full distance," says Anna, "as on the day, it's your adrenaline that'll push you through the last few miles. In fact, you might actually fatigue yourself too much if you try the full 26 before the race."

Instead, spend the last month bringing your longer weekend runs down from 20 miles to 15, then 13, and finally 10 miles. Now's the time to focus on shorter runs and speed work, plus getting some much-needed recovery. "In the last two weeks there's nothing you can do that will help you apart from rest and nutrition," says Anna. "In fact, if you're starting to feel niggles, you shouldn't force yourself to run at all. It's more important to get your body feeling rested, recovered and ready to go."

Now for the fun part: carb-loading. But don't make the mistake of thinking this means you can indulge in junk food: "You should be fuelling your body, not filling it with rubbish," says Anna. Instead, chow down on complex carbohydrates such as oats, rice and wholegrain pasta in

the two weeks before race day, and start cutting down on protein as it'll stop your body absorbing maximum carb energy. Marathon trainers joke that on the day of the race you should be feeling "fit and fat," filled up on energy and raring to go.

The Big Day

You've collected your race number and your heart's already thumping—time to get your mind and body in the zone. You should have eaten breakfast two hours before the race and spent the previous day chugging water to ward off premature dehydration—during the race you'll only want tiny sips to avoid overloading your system. Now focus on a gentle mobility warmup, jogging on the spot and doing some dynamic stretching to loosen your hips and hamstrings.

Don't shoot off at the starting gun—stick to your pacing plan or you'll risk burning out. "It's a case of the hare and the tortoise," says Anna; "slow and steady really does win the race. It can be hard to focus when there are so many people speeding off in front of you but keep checking your watch and stick to your training pace. I know that I run a seven minute mile, so every time I pass a mile marker I check that I'm hitting seven minutes, then 14, then 21, and so on. If I find I'm ahead of myself then I actually try to slow down a bit to conserve my

energy for the final stretch."

Marathon runners dread hitting "The Wall," where it feels like you can't go on. To skip it, Anna recommends thinking of the marathon as 42k and then breaking down into four 10k runs with an adrenaline-fuelled burst at the end. And to avoid running on empty, ensure you're taking in some energy in the form of gels or beans every 45 minutes.

And finally? Remember to have fun! You've worked hard for this achievement, so take a moment to enjoy it.

You Made It!

We won't lie to you: The aftermath of the marathon isn't likely to be pretty—but there are ways to keep the pain at bay. Experts recommend diving into an ice bath as soon as possible to suppress inflammation and tissue breakdown. And Anna advises resisting the urge to flop on the floor after the race: "Try and keep mobile. You'll feel like collapsing but that'll make your body completely stiffen up. Keep walking as much as possible afterwards, do your stretches, and get a massage as soon as you can. Refuel the fluids and nutrients you've used up. Then a day or two afterwards, go for a gentle mix of walking and jogging. Getting out for some physical activity should help ease the emotional comedown, too." And the best way to banish post-marathon blues? Sign up for the next one, of course! ■

When The Going Gets Tough...

Mid-race motivation from readers who've survived a marathon

Mind Over Matter

"It sounds so cheesy, but I had a mantra that I used even on my training runs: 'I am strong; I am powerful; I will finish this.' I just whispered it to myself ad nauseum to the beat of my footsteps—it was the 'fake it till you make it' approach!"—Nicola

Treat Yo'self!

"I'd make little bargains with myself—just make it to the next mile and you can have a sip of water or a jellybean. I also chatted with other runners and played mental games to pass the time and distract myself from the pain during the long middle slog."—Alex

Make It Personal

"I dedicated difficult miles to someone who was important to me. I knew I'd hit The Wall at mile 20, so I ran it for my grandmother, who had recently passed away. Everyone had the final mile—it felt like I had a whole team cheering me on!"—Alice

Bring Cheerleaders

Quite a few of my friends and family came along to watch, so I asked them to stand and cheer at different set points along the route. It meant I had lots of little exciting moments seeing a friendly face to keep me going."—Sophia