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"I'M A RUNNER!"

HALF MARATHON

RACING MADE SIMPLE

There is one simple goal: To get from Point A (starting line) to Point B (finish line) in the least amount of time. For everyone that means bringing your best trained body to the race and running a smart race.

You can't change your genes. Some folks are just plain better-built to run fast. You can't change the weather. If it's hot, humid, windy or raining cats and dogs you have no chance for personal records. But if you prepare your own unique body to run as fast as possible and if you run a smart race, you'll do your very best. That is what running is all about.

What constitutes a "smart race"? Smart racing is all about pacing and hydration. Smart pacing for most of us means running the race at as constant a pace as possible. Most records and personal bests come with "flat" pacing where each mile or kilometer takes as close to the same time as possible. Hydration means replacing the water lost by sweating. (Read more on hydration further down in this section.)

I have found there two ways to run a "dumb race", at least for me. I cannot race against other people. If I do, I have a high probability of going too fast, too early only to come crashing down in the late stages. I must race the course and listen only to what my body is telling me. Second, I must be very careful of hot humid weather. About once every two or three years I run a "dumb race". It's always the same two mistakes. You'd think I'd learn.

This article will focus on how to run your best possible Half Marathon. Other races of a similar distance are 15K (9.3 miles) and 10 miles. All share the same characteristics. Running a 10k or 5k will take only minor changes which are easily incorporated. The Marathon is another deal altogether and therefore has its own separate article. Should the Marathon be your goal, navigate to that article on our website.

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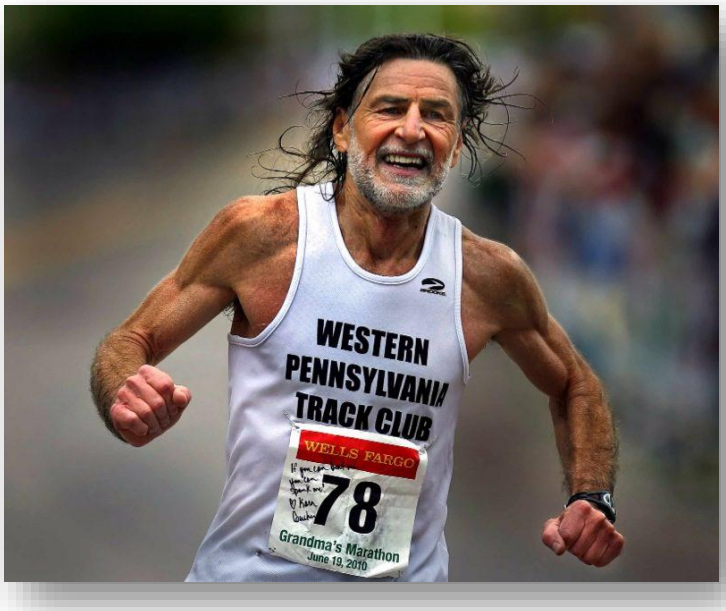

What you'll find in this article:

1. 3 ½ Month Training Plan
2. Race Day Pre-race
3. The Race
4. The Recovery
5. "Inside my head in an all-out effort"

Tips ON RACING the Half Marathon:

The training build-up

1. Let's start with the overall objective which is to log enough total training miles to be able to finish a 13.1 mile race without getting injured during training or on race day. The training period should be about 3 1/2 months assuming one is not starting from zero.

2. Enough miles means simply the total build to being able to run a minimum of 10 miles or more on single days during the later training period leading up to the race. More is even better but 10 is the minimum goal. If 10 mile days are not achievable a 13.1 mile race "will not be much fun."

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Let's plan for a race 3 ½ months out

Time to Race	Goal	Comments
First Month	Building to 1 hour per day 6 days per week	End month at 6 hours per week
Second Month	Add 1 hour 30 minute days as body permits	1 day/week; then 2 etc.
Third Month	Add 2 hour days as body will permit	2 hrs>1hr 20>1hr 30> Off> Repeat
Two Weeks Pre-Race	Taper	Let the body heal and get ready

1. During the first month simply build to 6 miles per day on as many days per week as possible. Run at a pace that is comfortable and can be held for at least 2 miles at a time. The goal here is to build a base through consistency and getting the body ready for what is to come.

2. Add mileage carefully. If you are somewhat tired and sore, you can still run but run less. If anything actually hurts, don't run. During the entire build-up period I ask myself: "Am I building up? Or am I breaking down?" If I'm building up, I keep pushing. But if I'm breaking down, I cut back.

3. Starting about 4 weeks into the build and after reaching this 30+ mile per week level, the new goal is to increase one day per week from 6 to 7 to 8 to 9 to 10 miles. Keep the other days constant at about 6 miles. As the training goes on, I like to get two days per week at these higher totals but still keeping the core days at 6 miles and running on most days of the week. For example, 2 days of 8 equals 16 miles plus 4 days of 6 equals 24 miles for a weekly total of 40 miles which for me is another milestone in this build.

4. At any time during the build-up don't be afraid to take a day off. You'll come back much stronger the next day. I never like to skip 2 days in a row, however.

5. The final month is the Make or Break period. It's during this 4 week period you will either become a well-trained machine or not. My goal is to arrive at a fitness level where I can run on three consecutive days a 12-8-10 mile sequence. The more times I can do this, the more I know I'm ready.

6. Some other general points: Measure your distances and courses so you can learn pace. There are many new devices for such, including smart phones, watches etc. Keep a running dairy. Run on soft surfaces if possible.

7. Be sure you have good running shoes. Normally, I have 3 active training shoes and rotate them daily. I buy 3 new ones after every target race or about every 4

months (3 new shoes, every 4 months means 9 shoes per year). It's not cheap but does help prevent injury.

Practice Race:

1. If a Half Marathon is your first race, I'd suggest one practice race of 5K but absolutely no closer than 3 weeks to the race (6 weeks is better). The purpose is to get the pace goals firmly set in your mind and feel a real race environment.

The Taper:

1. Interestingly to taper is not so easy. We cannot bring ourselves to run so little after working so hard to build up. But to achieve the best race results we must run fewer days and fewer miles when we run. A friend once told me: "In the 2 weeks before a race you cannot do anything to improve your results, you can only screw it up". So cut back, let everything heal and get ready for the beating to come.

2. Use this time to practice pace. Use measured mile (1/4 if available) and beat your target pace into your brain.

3. The final two days before the race, I run both days but just enough to warm up….say one or two miles. If I don't run I'm very stale early in the race.

4. During this time drive the course. I will drive race courses that I've run 10 to 15 times. This little exercise will help fix in your brain just on how far 13.1 miles is. It will also clearly define important segment markers during the race.

Race Day Pre-Race

1. I wake-up 3 hours 5 minutes before the race.

2. I eat very bland pasta with tomato sauce 3 hours before the race, absolutely no later or I have stomach problems during the race. Races of 9 miles or more require pre-race food while those 6 miles and less do not.

3. Drink lots of fluids (including coffee) until 2 hours before then stop. If you don't stop drinking at 2 hours pre-race you'll have to pee at an inopportune time.

4. Normally, I am very regular (B. M.) every day but before races I always have to go twice with the last one maybe 30 minutes before. Needing to find a port-a-potty during the race is no good as is diarrhea flowing down the legs. Learn what works for you.

5. I arrive one hour before so not to be rushed. If there is transportation to a starting line, I arrive even earlier.

6. For the ½ M warm-up I run about a quarter or half mile emphasizing some short sprints. I let the first half mile of the race be part of the warm-up.

7. 10 minutes before the race (not earlier- see the pee note above) I drink 0.5 liter of water. Now I'm hydrated.

What to wear? Temperature effect.

1. < 45 degrees F: hat, gloves, long sleeve shirt and maybe tights.

2. 48 to 52 degrees F: ideal. Shorts and singlet. Sometimes I wear a throwaway shirt just not to be cold at the starting line.

3. 52 to mid 60s: progressively becoming dangerous.

4. 70 degrees and above I'm not running, at least not racing.

The race

1. The most important question is what pace can I run? And this must be answered long before race day. And fortunately that answer is quite simple. If one takes the last 4 weeks of their training program you add up the time of all your runs in minutes and divide that by the total miles run and you have a very good "training pace" baseline. Using that number here's what I have found. If the weather is good, if I am ready to race and if I run a smart race, I can expect to race about 1 minute per mile faster than that average training pace. So now I have a goal or maybe better, a best possible target.

2. Then I divide the race into three parts for both pace and the stress expectation.

3. For pace I use a 4-5-4 miles breakdown. The first 4 must be easy…..no….very easy. The next 5 are pushed but with caution. In this middle section you want to feel you're working hard but still visualizing how for you've got left to go. The last 4 are pushed with whatever is left. My pacing goal is for every mile to be as close to the same time as possible. My best races always have mile times that vary by only a few seconds. One in particular miles 2 through 13 were only +/- 2 seconds (on a flat course).

4. For stress expectation, the key point is you are not half way through at 6 ½ miles. During the race, I like to think the mid-point is around 9 miles. A focus on 5k to go can also help. Unless someone is injured you can always find a way to gut out 5k.

5. I quite strongly recommend for a first ½ M you run what are called negative splits or run the 4-5-4 breakdown progressively faster. Let's say your average training pace was 9:00. You run 9:00 for the first 4 miles; 8:30 for the mid 5 miles and 8:00 (or whatever) for the finishing 4 miles. 9:00- 8:45- 8:30 also works.

6. Be especially careful of the first mile. At least half the runners in the field are idiots. They will go out way too fast. Think over and over again of a mental picture just how far 13.1 miles is ahead of you. The finish line is absolutely not 1 mile away. For every second you gain in the first third of a race by running too fast, you'll lose at least 5, maybe 10 seconds late in the race. Plus….plus the pain will be much worse. The first few times you try a half marathon it is not possible to run the first mile too slow. My suggested time for your first mile is to target your training baseline pace. Even that value plus 30 sec. is not too slow. There will always be time to pick up the pace. To achieve this, it will seem like you're running at way too slow a pace. The risk of running the first mile too fast can be higher if you run "as a buddy group". It takes only "one idiot" to suck in everybody.

7. Take walking breaks (20 seconds or so) to drink water (not Gator aide unless you know your stomach can take it) at the water stops around 3, 6 and possibly 9 miles. After 9 miles it doesn't do any good except for post-race rehydration. If it's a cold day I can sometimes get by with only one walking drink and two running ones where much doesn't get down. If it's hotter, I am much more careful to stay hydrated. I'm not going to have a good time anyway, so why risk a heat stress problem. Proper hydration comes with experience, is person specific and is very important for race performance as well as avoiding serious dehydration and over hydration problems.

8. Here's what I have found how dew point or humidity effects my pace.

Pace vs. Dew Points:

Dew Points	**½ M**	**10 miles**	**5k**
< 40 degrees	7:30	7:25	6:50
50	7:35	7:30	
60	7:40	7:35	
70	7:50	7:45	7:00
>70	too dangerous to race	too dangerous to race	

The above data are actual races 2004/ 2005.

Note: dew point data is usually available on the weather channel/ local.

1. Cold Weather: Be sure you have dressed properly for the weather conditions. Flexibility is the key. It's better to over dress but with clothes that can be easily removed and adjusted for the conditions. Remember in some cases adding back clothes can become necessary due to wind changes, rain, etc. Here are my ranges: 48 degrees F (9 degrees C) and above I wear a singlet and shorts together with a throw away shirt at the lower end of the range. I might start with a cap and gloves but usually remove them early in the race. At 40 to 48 degrees F (4 to 9 degrees C) I wear light weight tights and a long sleeve shirt which can be zipped way down. Again, cap and gloves which will stay on longer.

2. Very Cold Weather: Races with temperatures less than 40 degrees F/ 4 degrees C can be wonderful conditions. But hey can also be dangerous. If during the race you should be unable to run for whatever reason, hypothermia can become a serious problem. These conditions can result in the fastest race times. But I'm always careful to have an extra (dry) shirt tied around my waist.

3. Hot Weather: Some guys run without a shirt. I use as light weight clothes as possible. But there are really only two things you can do. First, you must hydrate before, during and after the race. Second and even more important is to adjust your pace to the conditions. (See my pace at various dew points at the end of this section.) I am a heat and humidity wimp. At dew points over 70 degrees F (21 degrees C), I usually stay home. My best times are always with dew points 40 degrees F or lower (5 degrees C).

4. The night before a race I always check the weather forecast for temperature and dew point. Then I have a conscious plan for pace and race hydration needs as well, what to wear before and during the race.

The Race some other thoughts

1. Start up front as far as possible. I start on the opposite side of the first turn but I never start more than one or two rows back. Once I lost a half marathon by 1.5 seconds…all at the start. Never again. If I think the person just behind me might be a little careless, I have been known to look them in the eye and say: "If you don't trip me I won't trip you". So far it seems to have worked.

2. The last seconds before the race I remind myself of the pace and hydration plan I intend to follow.

3. Start easy and let the race come to you. My first mile pace goal is about 20 seconds slower than the target average. Once into the race, my goal is to run each mile as close as possible to the same pace. Here are the 1/2 M actual

results from the best age graded race to date: 8:13 (Gun Start); 7:53; 7:52; 7:52 (plus 10 sec. water stop); 7:53; 7:56; 7:55; 7:49; 7:51; 7:47; 7:51; 7:47; 7:44; 0:48. Miles 2 to 7 averaged 7:55 and Mile 8 to 13 averaged 7:48 for a slight negative spit pace.

4. Think about how long you have to go. Don't be in a hurry.
5. Relax, relax, relax. I've actually measured my heart rate while running and shown I can lower it just by relaxing while maintaining the same pace.
6. Make a nice light foot strike. Keep your stride count at about 90 cycles per minute. Count them if you're unsure.
7. I don't look at the watch during a race. I simply record the splits for learning. I run by how I feel. I know I must feel the race is easy early on. I expect the stress to build. I know the final part will be pure hell.
8. While I have never experienced the problem of over hydration, it can happen, especially on cool days and for those who are running at a slow pace where they are not losing much water. Over hydration can be very dangerous.
9. If the dew point is > 70 degrees F (21 degrees C) I'll need lots of hydration. If it's < 30 degrees F (0 degrees C), I won't need very much. My clothes range from completely water soaked to hardly wet and this is a clear indication of how much water I'm losing and will need to replace. Both under hydration an over hydration are very dangerous so it is extremely important to learn what your body will need under various race conditions.

Recovery

The older you get the more recovery time is required. I do not fully recover from an all out race of 9 to 13 miles (15 to 21 km) even in three weeks. I never race again during that time and I've learned three weeks will not get me fully back. Racing before full recovery is a guaranteed way to get injured.

Here's what I have learned to do: The first week I focus only on recovery. I walk with my wife. I take most days off. And I want to forget the stress and pain of that last race. This first week is not about training, it's all about recovery and not getting injured.

The second week I begin carefully with the restart of training. What works best for me is simply returning to nice training mileage and pace. Nice easy runs of about 1 hour on soft surfaces at training pace will aid the recovery process. I stick to this level until I'm sure the recovery is complete. If in doubt, remember it's recovery, recovery, recovery. There will always be ample time to return to serious training.

When I'm confident the recovery is totally complete, I return to a build for the next target race, whenever that may be.

Inside my head during an all out 100% effort 1/2 marathon

Note: Some of this may be duplicated in other sections, but this section will focus on what I'm thinking as the pre-race and actual race develops.

Pre Race

1. The alarm rings at 3:45 AM. What am I doing up this early? I'd like to jump back in bed and forget this foolishness. I eat my small dish of spaghetti.

2. I drink coffee until 5:00 AM. I read the newspaper and try not to get too excited. I check the temperature, dew point and wind.

3. I shower and dress 5:30 AM and leave for the race at 5:45 AM. I'm sure to take a full change of clothes, shoes, towel etc. I make a final check to be sure all the necessary race gear is solidly affixed to my body. I put on a throw away shirt because it's cold today.

4. I arrive at 6:00 AM, pick up my timing chip; tie it to my shoes so it cannot come off; retie the shoes triple knot and chat with friends and strangers. I try to stay quiet.

5. 6:20 AM second bowel movement. Great. Now it's unlikely I'll have that problem during the race!

6. At 6:40 AM I start with some easy warm up jogging. I do this right by the start line so I'm near where I want to start. No rush…just a nice easy jog. After about 400 meters, I add 2 or 3 accelerations….very carefully. We don't want any pulled muscles now. I stop and do some very careful stretching.

7. At 6:50 AM I drink the 0.5 liter water I brought with me. Now I'm well hydrated and this will give my stomach a head start on keeping me hydrated as I lose water during the race. I do about 3 more accelerations and the final careful stretching. I take my position just behind the elite runners on the opposite side of the first turn. I'm ready to go.

8. Now, I conscientiously remind myself DO NOT RACE OTHER PEOPLE and of my hydration plan. I visualize just how far 13.1 mile/ 21.1 km is. I will run my race.

Bang….The gun goes off….The race is on

1. The first 100 to 200 meters I get bumped a little. Some people are trying to run faster and some slower. Some weave in and out. This is normal.

2. At the 1/2 mile/ 800 meters mark I'm still tight. The muscles are not ready to race yet. It's impossible or at least not advisable to warm up completely. We want to save that stored energy for the race. There are still some runners trying to run faster. I stay with my pace and let them go.

3. At the first mile mark I take a quick look at my watch. The pace is 8:20…very close to my plan.

4. Mile 1 to 3.5 I'm thinking relax, relax, relax. Actually, the pace begins to feel easier. I know this is normal and I'm sure I am running faster as my muscles warm up. I am very careful not to push too hard. I know it must feel quite easy at this point. The stress will surely come later.

5. Even though I have said I will not race other runners, I do see an age group competitor is about 400 meters ahead of me. Wow, he's that far ahead! Still, I grab a cup of water and I walk for about 10 seconds to be sure I get most of it in my stomach. I grab a second cup and it's back to the pace.

6. From Miles 3.5 to 5, the pace remains quite easy but now there is some stress building. I think: relax, relax, relax and make those foot strikes: light, light, light.

7. From Miles 5 to 7, I feel I am laboring more than I would like. I wonder what the problem might be. I have no answer and no alternative so I press on. At the Mile 6 turnaround, I again check on my age group competitor. I don't see any change. He still appears to be 400 meters ahead.

10 km to go

1. At Mile 7 there's another turnaround. I check on him again. It seems I have made up some distance, maybe 100 meters. But that may be just wishful thinking.

2. At Mile 7.5 there's another water stop. I grab a cup of water and throw it on my head. It's a shock but it feels good. I repeat the process (always being careful it's not Gatorade).

3. Miles 7.5 to 10.5 is a long stretch out and back. I know this section well and I hate it. As I go out I know every step will have to be repeated coming back. And the stress is really building at this point in the race. Again. I say to myself: relax, relax, relax.

4. At the 9 mile mark is the last turn around. Where's my competitor? Wow, I am gaining ground. He might be only 50 meters ahead now. I think: be careful. There's still 4 miles/ 6.4 km to go.

5. At the 9.5 mile mark I finally catch him. But I don't pass. I slow to his speed, staying one or two steps behind. I conserve energy for a solid pass. After about 100m meters I'm ready for the pass. This I do and I maintain the quickened pace until I believe I have put about 100 meters between us. I do not look back so I'm not sure. Looking back is a sign of weakness.

5 km to go

1. I feel terrible. I can hardly pick up my feet. Despite my desires I cannot make a light foot strike. Each hit to the pavement is sloppy. But I know somehow I can make it to the finish line.

2. With 2 miles/ 3.2 km to go I still feel terrible but importantly it's not getting any worse. As bad as I feel my pace does not seem to be slowing. I fight hard to keep from throwing up. I pass two runners about 30 years younger than me. That does give me a little lift.

3. It's 1 mile/ 1.6 km to go. It's fight, fight, fight. No more relax, relax, relax. I swing my arms to help push me forward.

4. I can see the finish line. The people are cheering. I've almost made it.

5. I cross the line. I throw up.

HOW DO I RUN MY BEST RACE AT THE MOST IMPORTANT TIME?

Here's my answer to that question. (It should be understood the answer comes from experiences of a man nearly 74 years old. Likewise, while he did run in college with courses around 5 miles, his current target distances are 10 miles to 13.1. There are some significant differences between races at those distances and 5 km.)

There is no magic in a human running a specific distance in the fastest time. We are biomechanical machines. I am able to predict my finish time in important races by about 1%. That's 60 seconds in a 13.1 mile race for me or in the case of a 16 minute, 5 km runner about 10 seconds.

First a list of all the things which add time and are uncontrollable:

1. Course difficulty: especially hills and the running surfaces.

2. Wind.

3. Weather: especially humidity.

In all these cases, +1 and -1 do not add up to zero.

Now for the list of things which go into a good race but do not speak to having the best race at the right time:

1. Miles logged.
2. Race specific training: distance, hills, etc.
3. Race week preparation.
4. Night before preparation.
5. Race day preparation.

Now for my answer to the question

1. At the start line, I repeat the following: "I am ready". "I am confident". "I will run a smart race".
2. What constitutes a smart race? Well, what constitutes a dumb race for me is to race other competitors. My worst races always come from racing someone else and not racing against my best capability.
3. The goal of any race is to run each mile split as close to the same as possible. In last year's Naples Half I ran miles 2 through 12 at 7:52 + or – 2 seconds. It was my PR in age adjusted time. Of course, shorter races make this difficult to achieve but understand if you don't run flat times your result will not be at your best potential.
4. A famous New Zealand coach Arthur Lydiard once said the key to racing is to "listen to your wind". To run flat times you must "listen to your wind". At the start it's too easy, later the stress starts to build; and at the end it's pure hell.
5. Somewhere around 1958 I ran in a 10,000 meter AAU race and it was pointed out by my buddies a guy named Horace Aschenfelter was also in the race. He was a world class Olympic runner. I said to myself, I'll start next to him and see what I can learn. At the 1 mile mark, we were way behind. I remember thinking, those dogs they played a joke on me. This guy is no world class runner. (He won the race and I had my best ever. The effect of passing folks all the way home was a great motivator.)
6. Paavo Nurmi was the world champion distance runner at multiple distances. Routinely, he would lose races to men with less potential. But when the big races

came he always won. His secret was simple. He only focused on the big races. All the others were simply build-up races.

7. Actually, I do pretty much the same. I have 2 or 3 targets each year and that's it. I space these out no closer than 3 months apart. That way I can properly train for the big races. I do run other races but they are only for benchmarks in the progress toward an upcoming real goal. I divide races into three categories: Practice/ Training Races, Solid Races, and All Out Full Go Races. Bottom line: to run your best in the right race, clearly decide what that target race is and train and race accordingly.

8. None of this means a young guy cannot race with his team every week at the distance of 5 km. But, it does mean if want to do your best in a specific race you will need to train and race to reach your peak exactly on the day of that race. Said another way, you cannot run a PR every week but you can run a PR in a specific race if that's what you work toward.

9. I know some key races will have too many runners to run your absolute best. Some will require getting out early to keep from getting bumped all over. But just remember, if you don't run flat pacing you cannot run your biomechanical best. So try to learn what balance works best for you. That's what I use the non-target races for.

In conclusion, I'd like to take a different perspective. Long distance running is a great sport with great people. I've said this before. I owe my education, my wife and my career to the sport. It teaches some of life's great lessons. But we should never take it too seriously. It's a means to an end, not an end unto itself. No matter how fast you are, there always is (or soon will be) someone faster. Don't get burned out.

Enjoy the sport. Reap its benefits. Run for Life.