

# CONQUERING MARATHONS 101

A group of runners in silhouette, running on a track. The runners are in various stages of their stride, and the track has white lane markings. The background is a light grey gradient.

By Dr Mok Ying Ren

**IT'S THAT** time of the year again, when many Singaporeans are starting to worry about the end of year marathon that they signed up for months ago, possibly even forgetting that they need to do some training and conditioning before they can safely complete a 42.195-kilometre run. If you have not bought new running shoes yet, it's time to get those good old Brooks out of your storeroom and lace up!

Here is a step-by-step guide for you to start a training programme.

## 01

### Start a training log

It's always a good time to start keeping one! Head down to your nearest Popular bookstore and get a diary. Preferably one with two-page monthly calendars. I like this format as it allows a bird's eye view of each month, and you can look back on the year with just 12 flips!

## 02

### Get fancy with writing equipment

I like to add some colour to my training log. A pencil to put in running plans, a red pen to signify hard workouts so that you can literally redline your thresholds, and a blue pen to mark easy runs. Isn't it great that a quick glance through the pages will show the frequency of your hard and easy runs over the next few months?

## 03

### Mark your races

Obviously, circle the date of your year-end marathon as the most important day of your training calendar. Next, note upcoming races that you will enter as a build-up to the main marathon. I strongly recommend the Newton Challenge, a 32-kilometre race on 26 October 2014 (<http://www.newtonchallenge.com>), as covering a substantial distance five weeks before your key race is an indicator of where you stand.

Now you have set the stage for some simple planning!



# 04

## Set a realistic goal

Setting a goal is not as easy as it sounds. If this is your first marathon, your goal should be just to complete the race. If this is not your first, look back at your training and performance last year, and try to aim for reasonable improvement.

Once you have set your target for the race, you can start working backwards to break down your timing. Completing a marathon in four hours is equivalent to taking one hour for each ten-kilometre stretch, or six minutes per kilometre. This will be your race pace, which you should follow if you want to meet your desired timing. Got the idea?

# 05

## Plan the long runs

Next, circle the date four weeks before the marathon to clock your longest training run. (It's a good idea to set aside Sundays for long runs as this is usually the best day to meet up with your friends to get the miles in together.)

For beginners, let's not go by distance. Instead, they should ideally aim to complete that run in two-and-a-half to three hours. More experienced runners should try to cover 32 to 35 kilometres in that run. Yes, there is often no need to cover the length of a marathon in the build-up for one, but if you think that's going to give you the confidence for the actual race, feel free to do so.

After you've set your target for the final run, you can start working backwards for your remaining training sessions. Take away about 5% to 10% of the weekly time or distance in reverse, and pencil each target into your log (until you reach a suitable goal for your very first session). For example, if your final long run is 35 kilometres, your practice run the week before would be equivalent to subtracting 10% from 35, which is equivalent to 31.5 kilometres. Or if you are going by time and your final long run is 180 minutes (three hours), your long run the week before would mean deducting 10% from 180, which gives 162 minutes (2 hours 42 minutes).

After these runs, record the duration or distance you have run in RED, and feel a sense of pride and satisfaction while doing so. Long runs are not easy and you should try to do it in a group. A good way to find like-minded athletes is to join training programmes with running clubs, such as Running Department (<http://www.runningdept.com>). Do make sure you are adequately hydrated by carrying water bottles or running along a route with water tap stations such as East Coast Park.

## Put in race pace runs

You want to be conditioned to the pace required as much as possible so that you can click off each kilometre like clockwork during the marathon. How? Practice, practice, practice!

Slot in a race pace run once a week. You should aim to complete 20 kilometres continuously for the final session, so schedule it three weeks before the marathon. Thereafter work backwards (similar to planning the long runs), cutting back two kilometres each week. This means that if your final race pace run is 20 kilometres, aim to complete 18 kilometres the previous week. The total distance is a guide but you can mix and match intervals to make up that distance, so let your creative juices flow. For example, you can do four sets of five-kilometre runs, with five-minute walks between each set, to make up the 20 kilometres.

After completing each race pace run, record their duration or distance in RED.

# 06



### Plan your recovery

Now that you have set aside the race pace runs, make the days before and after those runs recovery days – draw a big R on those dates. On these recovery days, jog for 30 minutes or have a good rest! Remember you can only improve your timings or distances after you fully recover from your previous sessions of hard work.

After finishing these recovery runs, note the duration or distance in BLUE.

## 08

### Fill up the remaining days with easy runs

After taking into account your long runs, race pace runs and recovery days, you have three days left in your week to do easy runs! What you need to do is run a conversational pace for at least an hour. Walk if you need to, but the most important thing is just to have fun and enjoy the wind in your face.

Once you have completed these easy runs, log their duration or distance in BLUE.

## 09

### All set for the marathon

You now have a simple plan to train for the marathon! Keep this training log as a guide for next year's race, add in what works for you – like the kind of race pace runs or duration of your easy runs, and refine it further over the years. As you embark on your training programme, try to understand your body better and learn how to whip it into shape for the next race!

All the best and see you at the starting line! ■

### 5 running tips for race day

- 1. Breakfast.** Eat what you have been used to having before those weekly long runs that you have been doing. Do not try anything foreign on race day. For me, a bowl of cereal with milk two hours before the race works well. Remember not to consume too much as you do not want your stomach jumping during the run. Eat just enough to fill up your stomach so that you do not feel hungry at the starting line.
- 2. Race pacing.** You have been working very hard on your race pace, so it is time to execute it during the marathon. Do not get carried away by the crowd and music as the adrenaline pumps through your blood. Stay controlled and run at your usual race pace. Chances are that you will feel that it is really easy at the start and will be tempted to push the pace. Steady yourself and do NOT fall into this psychological trap. If your pace happens to coincide with that of the race pacers provided (runners who run with balloons at a designated pace), you are in luck. Just follow those balloons and enjoy your marathon experience!
- 3. Race nutrition.** This is the tricky portion that you should have ideally practised during your long runs. You will need to find a way to carry energy gels – small packets of gooey substances that are rich in carbohydrates – possibly in a pocket or on a fuel belt. These gels can be purchased at running stores. Consume about one gel for each hour of the race. Plan ahead so that you can ingest them with water at water points.
- 4. Race hydration.** It is tough to race in Singapore as the weather is warm and humid, so be prepared to sweat buckets. Since your sweat contains not only water, but also electrolytes like sodium and potassium, you need to rehydrate your body with electrolyte drinks – plain water is not enough. Drink stations at races will provide electrolyte drinks – consume these instead of plain water right from the first water point, and at every subsequent one. Drink to the point where your thirst is quenched, and do not overdrink to prevent stomach upsets.
- 5. Mental game.** The real marathon challenge begins at the 30- to 35-kilometre mark – in your mind. This is when fatigue sets in, and you may witness some runners stopping and giving up. But you need to push through and just keep going. Draw inspiration from the crowd and other participants running alongside you. Try to tag along a fellow runner for a certain distance and when you are tired, walk a little before tagging along the next runner. Keep going and never give up! You will never regret completing a marathon.



*Dr Mok is a national marathoner who is currently serving his national service as a medical officer. He became a double Southeast Asian (SEA) Games gold medallist for triathlon in 2007, and more recently won the gold medal for the marathon event in the 2013 SEA Games. He currently holds the national records for the 5,000 metres and half-marathon events.*