

TRAINING NOTES
By Mike Gratton

Mike Gratton has a BEd degree in Physical Education as well as 20 years as a full GB International with a London Marathon win and Commonwealth Games Marathon behind him. He has coached several Kent athletes to International level, has designed training plans for Runner's World Magazine, lectured in Coach Education courses for UKA and organises training camps in Portugal for British runners of all ability levels training for the London Marathon.

Versions of this training plan have previously, and are currently in use again, by the Reading Half Marathon and Robin Hood Half Marathon (Nottingham).

Gaining Fitness: All people have different levels of 'trainability' and natural potential. It is possible for complete beginners to make very rapid progress and move up the targets, while others find initially that they can't achieve the early training levels.

There are two golden rules whichever level of improver you find yourself: a) Build-up very gradually, and b) You must rest and recover before training becomes beneficial.

Building-up: Even if you come from a good level of fitness, trying to build-up too quickly will certainly get you injured. Running is a repetitive activity that involves your foot hitting the floor repeatedly with considerable force being transmitted up through the legs and into the lower back. The reason that experienced runners can handle such high levels of training is because they have taken years to get there. Your body adapts slowly to new stresses and a product of regular running is that your bones will harden and become more resilient to the new forces. Beware: your engine (heart & lungs) may find it easy after a while – but after a while your legs won't be able to cope without regular recovery time.

Rest & Recover: The natural thought is that you get better when you train hard. While that is not altogether untrue, the reality is that your body actually gets fitter while you are resting. Here's how it works: during hard exercise your body gets tired, waste products build up and energy levels fall as you have used up fuel - you are technically less able than before you started training! If you continued the same level of activity over several days you would become progressively more tired and eventually you will breakdown – either with injury or illness. However, when you stop and rest your body starts to repair the damage, which it will do to a higher level than before as the body recognises a need to adapt to the new stresses that you're subjecting it to.

Frequency: A regular training pattern is more important than any one session. There is a cumulative effect from training regularly which is not achieved by doing all of your training on one or two days each week.

Going the Distance: For half marathon races it is feasible to train up to and over the race distance. If you're in the good club runner category it is desirable to build endurance with regular long runs of around 2hrs, which for most will be in excess of the half marathon distance – however, the pace should be much slower than race pace!

Your training is done to encourage physiological changes in your body – one of these is the ability to use different forms of energy. The most efficient energy source is glycogen – basically a sugar stored in the muscles. This will last for about 1 ½ hrs of fairly rigorous exercise – like running – but less than that if running at a very high level/pace. After that has gone the body learns to use fat for energy – which we all have a big supply of. The problem is that the body does not convert fat to energy very efficiently, although it can be improved by doing runs over 1 ½ hrs. 2-hour runs have been found to be ideal (regardless of the distance covered in that time). It is sufficient time on your feet to help train the energy systems, it encourages local endurance in the leg muscles and joints and it teaches you how to run efficiently. The occasional run over 2 hours is good for confidence – but in general longer will not mean fitter as you will not recover adequately to do your other training.

The amount of rest: Some leading athletes appear to not rest at all – to run at World class you have to achieve high quantities of training. These are the fittest and most economical movers in the World who can run for 30-40 mins without appearing to sweat – a gentle hour run does not tax them. They are not like us – at least not in the early days of training; we expend enormous amounts of energy with each stride as the shock wave from each step knocks the wind out of your lungs. It is natural that you will feel more tired than these genetically gifted people and you must give sore legs time to recover. How much rest is down to you, we all have different needs, but a rule of thumb is that if your muscles are sore to touch after a hard session then the next session should be a rest day or very easy day until the soreness is gone. Avoid doing two consecutive hard days and aim for hard, rest, easy, steady, and hard as a general pattern.

Speed and ability are not necessarily good indicators of how efficient a runner you may be – slower runner's may simply not have the cardio-vascular system (heart & lungs) to run fast, but can run forever without getting injured. Conversely, plenty of fast runners regularly get injured because the bodywork is not as strong as the engine. Unfortunately, it is a suck-it-and-see situation, and you'll find out soon enough – it is still essential to build in rest days to allow for the training effect to take place even if you fall in the never injured category.

Your Health: Everyone should be aware that there is a risk involved with active sport – heart defects leading to death being the most serious. That scare out of the way – for the vast majority of people active sport will improve your health and wellbeing.

Before setting out on an exercise regime you are well advised to visit your doctor for a check-up. A good doctor will be pleased to see you and should give you some advice on setting out – particularly if you have had a health problem like asthma, high blood pressure or suffer from carrying excess weight.

The down side of training for a half marathon is that the daunting nature of the event requires you to take on more exercise than is normally advised. While sensible levels of exercise will improve your health, the levels needed to train for a half marathon can lead to your immune system being suppressed. You will notice that sleep can become more difficult, your legs don't recover from runs as quickly, your resting pulse rate may be slightly higher than normal (it should get slower as you get fitter) - all of which may result in sore throats, colds that won't go away or flu. If you've gone this far – you must stop and recuperate. When you start up again start at a lower level and feel your way back gradually to where you were – but beware – where you were before is what got you ill in the first place!

Food & Drink: A healthy diet and high fluid intake are essential. Your body burns carbohydrate for the energy you need to make the muscles move, it also needs protein to help it recover from the damage done by hard exercise and it needs vitamins and minerals to maintain its health. So what you need is a good balanced diet. Make sure you are taking in plenty of carbohydrate but make sure you are not surviving just on carbohydrate – a plate with just pasta isn't a balanced diet. If you are taking in a lot of fruit and veg, yet still get colds you may need to look at vitamin supplements – but they are not essential if your general diet and health is good.

Liquid is essential. Even on a cold day you will lose a lot of liquid through sweating and breathing – if this does not get replaced your body cannot function properly. So make sure you drink regularly, before, during and after exercise – either water or an isotonic sport drink, the choice is down to taste although research does show that liquid is absorbed more quickly when taken as an isotonic drink (but don't treat them like soft drinks – during & immediately after exercise only is advisable).

Race Practice: For the beginner, taking part in a couple of 'pre-Half Marathon' events is an important part of the learning process. It is very different from running on your own: your perception of pace will alter and you will almost certainly run quicker in the first few miles than you thought you were, running uninhibited with a lot of people trying to step on your heels or stopping dead in front of you is frustrating, plus the whole thing about getting there, queuing for the loo (several times) and finding the start needs rehearsing. It's best to experience all before the big day so there are no surprises.

A 5 mile or 10km race will give you some confidence about doing the distance and will teach you something about 'racing' and sustaining your pace.

Tapering Down: Training takes about 2 weeks to become effective, which means there is little point in doing too much training in the last two weeks when it is far better to be letting the body recuperate and build up its energy reserves. There is a balance to be found: ease back too much and you will start to lose training effect and start to feel a little bit sluggish. Start to reduce the quantity of training 2 weeks before the marathon, but maintain some faster running to keep you feeling 'sharp'. Keep some light training going even in the last week – it's good for confidence – but don't burn up valuable energy with unnecessary 'nervous' training at the last minute.

In the last 3 days concentrate on getting lots of carbohydrate inside you and keep fully hydrated by sipping water regularly. Make your last big meal at least 12 hrs before the race and have a light breakfast 3 hrs before the start on the big day. Drink small amounts right up to start time and take 500ml of water on to the startline and drink it just before the gun is going to go off – it's the most valuable water you'll take on board all day. Then try to get a small amount of liquid at each drink station on the race course.