

Getting Through Your First Race

By Beth Moxey Eck

There is no running experience to match the feeling of finishing your first race. Few tasks in life are as clear-cut as running a race. There's a start and a finish; your job is to get from one to the other, and you'll be timed during the effort.

And although it's just you and the road, in no way is racing a lonely endeavour. In fact, the camaraderie you feel during a race – especially a first race – can be poignant. It's been known to reduce confirmed stoics to tears.

Another reason to race is that it's a motivator, perhaps more so than anything else in running. A race gives you a reason to train, to eat correctly, to lose a few pounds, to get fit, to get fast. Best of all, if you can run (or run/walk) for 30 minutes, you can complete a 5K race.

1. Pre-Race Preparations

Signing up for a race takes a little planning. Here's how to go about it.

Request an application

When sending off for an entry form, enclose a self-addressed stamped envelope. Expect to pay around a £5 entry fee for a 5K (a few of the regular monthly races are cheaper, or even free), and more for longer races that require additional supplies, services and traffic control.

Receive confirmation

When the entry form arrives, fill it out carefully and mail it back with your entry payment. Now you're in. Bigger races will send you confirmation that you're entered. If you registered online, you should receive an electronic confirmation.

Expert's tip

"If you're short of time, use the universal entry form available in Runners World magazine. All of the races listed in the magazine will accept it," says Steve Smythe, RW Race Services Editor. "You can also just turn up for quite a few races and enter on the day, although I wouldn't recommend it. It's just one more thing to do on the day of the race that can be avoided. In any case, it's better to have a pre-planned race as your goal."

2. Race Day

Race day can be intimidating, especially for first-timers. But staying organised will ease those jitters.

Arrive prepared

Bring everything you use during a training run: shoes, sports watch, hat, singlet, sports bra, jacket, tights etc. Then add the following items: race number (if you received it before the race), energy bars, plasters, water or sports drink, petroleum jelly or sports lubricant, and fresh clothes and extra socks to wear after the race.

Warm up and cool down

Between 20 and 30 minutes before the start of the race, warm up with 10 minutes of very easy running and walking. Stretch gently for a few minutes and mix in four or five 100m strides (at 90 per cent of maximum speed) to get you ready for the upcoming effort. To keep your heart rate up, move around or jog on the spot until the start. After the race, stretch gently again and jog for 5-10 minutes to cool down.

Line up at the start

As a first-timer, line up according to how fast you plan to run. If you're unsure of your pace, then position yourself towards the back of the pack. Do this about 10 minutes before the gun goes off. If it's a small race, five minutes should be plenty of time.

Run the race

When the gun or air horn goes off, things may seem chaotic and confusing, with runners weaving all over the place. This is normal. Simply stay calm and maintain a steady, even pace without jostling. As the race unfolds your body will adapt to a pace that feels comfortable. To help with motivation, pick someone in the pack who's running at your level and stick with them for the remaining miles. If you feel good, increase your speed during the last half-mile and finish strongly.

Keep moving through the finish line funnel

Once you cross the finish line, you'll walk through a roped-off area called a finish funnel. Stay in line and keep moving through it. At this point a volunteer may tear off the bottom portion of your race number or simply write down the number. This is used to calculate results.

Rehydrate and refuel

Help yourself to the refreshments at the finish table. Try to drink at least a pint of fluid immediately following the race. As for food, go ahead and grab some of what's on offer – it's time to replenish the water and nutrients that you've lost.

Expert's tip

"Start the race a little slower than you think you can average for the whole distance. Gradually start to pick up the pace after you've run for about half a mile," says exercise physiologist Joe Dunbar.

3. Racing Gear

Stick with the same shoes and gear that you wear on your training runs. Just be more careful about it – because it isn't a training run.

Shorts and tights

Choose shorts made from synthetic fabric that have a small inner pocket in which to hold your keys. Make sure that you've worn the shorts at least once during a training run so that you know they'll be comfortable. Wear tights or running pants for cold-weather races.

Socks

Ideally you should buy your socks when you buy your shoes (try them on together). A pair that has worked well for you in training will be fine on race day. The best sock fabrics wick sweat away from your feet. Steer away from cotton socks.

Training shoes or racing shoes?

Beginner racers should opt for trainers. You probably won't be in contention to win the race, so racing shoes simply aren't necessary. Save those lightweight racers for later – when you're ready for that PB effort.

Sports watch

Use a digital, sweat-resistant watch with a chronograph (stopwatch) to time your mile splits and record your finish time (this is particularly important in small races that don't have clocks around the course or at the finish). Your splits will help you to gauge and adjust your pace, and your finish time will serve as an instant reward for your effort.

Hat and gloves

To stay cool and protected from the sun, wear a hat made from polyester-mesh or CoolMax. You'll stay even cooler if it's equipped with a brushed inner sweatband. Wear gloves for cold-weather races – you can always tuck them into your waistband if you get too warm.

Expert's tip

"Wearing the right shirt is something many runners overlook when they race. A cotton T-shirt can weigh twice as much when it's wet, and it retains 80 per cent more moisture than most synthetic, breathable shirts," says RW Deputy Editor Sean Fishpool. "Most sportswear companies now make technical T-shirts or thermals, so there's quite a choice. Whether it's hot or cold, you'll be much more comfortable running in breathable fabrics."

4. Nutrition

How, what and when to eat and drink is everything in racing, so remember the following.

Fluids

Start hydrating your body the day before the race (carry a water bottle), and continue to drink on race morning. Top off your tank with 450ml of fluid an hour before the start. A good way to check your hydration is to monitor the colour of your urine: if it's clear to pale yellow you're properly hydrated. Also, drinking only water before a 5K or 10K is fine, because the carbohydrate in your muscles won't become depleted over this distance. But before and during longer races you'll need a carbohydrate drink (or another carbohydrate source) to replenish your body's lost carbohydrate and electrolyte stores.

Race-morning foods

Eat a light meal two to four hours before the race starts, aiming to take in around 200g (800 calories) of carbohydrate. Select high-carbohydrate foods and beverages which are low in fat, protein and fibre, such as bagels, cereals, bananas and high-carbohydrate drinks or bars.

Water stations

You're likely to encounter at least one water station in a big 5K. Make use of it, because even a slight drop in body fluid can hurt your performance. Simply grab a cup of water and keep moving. (Hint: pinch the top of the cup to minimise spillage.) If you must stop, move past the water station and step to the side.

Expert's tip

"For shorter distances, it's critical to consume adequate fluid before the race. Drink up to a pint of water or a carbohydrate drink an hour before the start. To avoid unnecessary stomach cramping and inconvenient pit stops, taper these sips until the start gun goes off. Drink a third 45 minutes before the start, another third 30 minutes before, two to three sips 15 minutes before, and one sip two minutes before," says RW Nutrition Editor Peta Bee.

5. Injuries, Aches And Pains

Some aches and pains during a race are the natural result of hard effort; others require attention. Here are some of the more common concerns.

Muscle cramps

This usually means dehydration, muscle tightness, depletion of electrolytes such as potassium or magnesium, or a combination of the three. If you experience a cramp, stop and stretch the muscle and drink a carbohydrate drink as soon as possible.

Side stitches

To stop a stitch, you need to change your breathing pattern. If you get a stitch on the right side, exhale forcefully as your left foot hits the ground. Do the opposite if you get a stitch on the left side. If this doesn't work, try pinching the stitch with your fingers.

Sprains

If you twist your ankle, stop running immediately. Sometimes, after a minute of walking, the pain will stop and you can continue running. If the pain doesn't subside or if it worsens, it could be a sprain. As soon as possible, get off your feet and put some ice on your ankle, then apply the RICE treatment (rest, ice, compression, elevation) for several days as needed.

Expert's tip

“ A side stitch is your body's way of telling you to make more room for breathing. To alleviate the stitch, slow down and steady your breathing. If the stitch remains, you may have to stop and stretch it out,” says RW Medical Advisor Dr Patrick Milroy. “Remember, it's okay to run through pain if it's tolerable, but the minute there's too much pain, you need to stop running and listen to your body. A rule of thumb is that if something feels wrong, it usually is.”

6. Psychology

You won't enjoy that first race if you don't have a good attitude about it. Most often, positive thinking translates into a positive race experience.

Don't worry about finishing last

First of all, if you've trained, you probably won't finish last. And even if you do come in last, so what? You'll probably receive the loudest cheers of all.

Don't fear the distance

If you've done the training, you can finish the race. If you really tire and need to walk, do it. As a first-timer, your task is to finish and feel good about it – save the world-record attempt for later.

Don't worry, be happy

A simple smile can do wonders for your self-image. And the more positive you are, the better you'll perform. In fact, studies have shown that the more positive you are about your running abilities, the more likely you are to think that you can run further when you're tired. So keep smiling.

Believe you belong

Be confident in the knowledge that you have as much right to race as anyone. Racing isn't all about speed or fast times (although both are nice on occasion), it's mostly about effort. If you're willing to put in the effort, you belong in the race.

Expert's tip

"To offset pre-race anxiety associated with a first race, don't get caught up in what others are doing. Focus on what you've brought to the race – your preparation, training and focus," explains sports psychologist Dave Yukelson. "Enjoy the experience, trust your preparation and run for the moment."

7. Recovery

Race strategy doesn't end when you cross the finish line. Proper recovery is essential for a positive first-race experience.

Take it easy

Keep things low-key for a few days after your race. Stretch a little more than usual. Jog a few miles if you feel like it, or take a day off. Some runners enjoy cross-training by cycling or swimming to keep their legs loose.

Get a massage

Reward yourself by scheduling a deep-tissue massage 24-48 hours after your race. A light rubdown is safe post-race, but a deep-tissue massage too soon after racing can tear already sore muscles.

Stretch

Gentle stretching and self-massage will hasten recovery. Pay special attention to your calves, quads and buttocks, which are likely to be the tightest, sorest areas.

Expert's tip

"An easy 20-minute walk/run a day or two after your race will help rid your aching muscles of built-up lactic acid," says coach Bud Baldaro. "A warning, though: don't jump into a hot bath after the race. You're better off in a tub of cold water and ice if your muscles are sore and inflamed."