

# Race Pacing & Strategy

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The anticipation, the excitement, the colour, the activity. Everything about a racing event tends to get you keyed up, and it should. Feed off the energy of your surroundings, and let your adrenaline do its work. But do keep yourself under control. The excitement of the starting line is a powerful mental tool, but it can also undermine your race if you let yourself go out too fast.

## Early pacing

No matter what distance you're running, hold yourself back in the early stages of the road race. After all your training, you are strong and powerful, and doubtless you are aching to push yourself. You'll get your chance, but save it for the end of the race when you'll need it. At the beginning, just concentrate on settling into a pace no faster than what you plan to be the average pace for the race overall. If you are running a marathon, the first few miles may feel ridiculously slow; think of them as warm-up miles and conserve your strength for the final stretch.

Except for the very smallest races, you will probably spend the first few minutes caught in the crowds. There's not much sense in fighting them; zig-zagging wildly through the throng will wear you out and could knock someone over (including yourself). Just flow with the crowd until you gradually get more space. Try to use a shuffling gait to keep your feet low and avoid tripping in the close conditions. As space opens up, ease into your familiar pace and stride.

## Take it up a notch

Only when you reach the halfway point should you start considering a faster pace. Take a mental inventory of your body and how you're handling the pace. If you think you can take the remaining course at a faster clip, then gradually step it up. No need to rush into a sprint; just take it up a notch and see how it feels.

Try to keep your pace steady. Throwing in bursts of speed is not a great idea, especially for the inexperienced racer. Adjust your pace and effort to the split times you hear or read along the course. Because strange things tend to happen to your mathematical ability as you get deeper into a long race, you might want to bring along a crib sheet if you are running the marathon distance. Jot down your target split times on a piece of paper tucked into your waistband.

Don't panic if split times show that you're off pace. Make a gradual, easy adjustment. But if you feel really lousy, and you just don't think you can keep up the pace you had hoped for, don't push it. Avoid injury and take the pace down.

Along the way, be sure to avoid dehydration by taking water at the water stations. For longer races -- particularly marathon distances and beyond -- consider bringing a snack along, too.

## Stay focused

Unlike your training runs, when much of the joy of the outing is about letting your mind wander in a kind of creative romp, racing requires a bit more discipline and focus. You should be constantly monitoring your pace and checking your body over for warning signs or even reservoirs of available energy. Pay attention to your breathing, the weather, the terrain, the runners around you.

The real trick is to do all of this while staying relaxed. It's not necessarily easy, since racing is largely about pushing yourself through pain. It is a peculiar irony; when you race you are in more discomfort than most people will ever be unless they become seriously ill. Yet the experienced racer remains at peace and completely at ease. Over time you become used to being a kind of detached observer of your own physical condition, coaching yourself through each section of the race.

As you approach the last leg of the race, it's time for the kick. Gauge how much extra energy you have left for the final push. If you have good speed, you might pour it out for a last burst of speed and kick the final half mile. If your speed is not so good, you might bet on endurance and step up the pace for a longer distance. Depending on your conditioning, that distance might be anywhere from half a mile to two miles for a 10K, or from a mile to five miles for a marathon. See what you have left to give, and push to the finish.