

# Racing Basics

## Start Small

The best way to approach racing is to start small. Whether you're planning to do your race as a one-off, or as the first step in a long running career, you'll enjoy it most if it's within your capabilities. That's not to say it should be easy. But we do want you to finish it feeling fired up. Look for a 5K race, ideally – that's five kilometres, or 3.1 miles. It will take most first-timers 25-40 minutes, and if you've been running for a few weeks, it's a distance that you'll be comfortable with. (Need a training schedule?)

First-timers do tackle longer distances, of course – five-milers, 10Ks, 10-milers, half-marathons and even marathons – but we wouldn't recommend going beyond a 10K, and even then we'd suggest you do a 5K as a practice race first. We'd probably suggest you run for 6-12 weeks before you think about a 5K; two to four months before a 10K, and four to six months before a half-marathon. We'd definitely urge you to resist the temptation to run a marathon until you have at least a year of training and racing under your belt. That way, you'll not only be able to get round it without falling to bits, you'll even be able to aim for a specific time.

But back to your first race... Most events are on Sundays, but you may find some 5Ks in the evenings, too. The bigger the race, the more you'll get absorbed into the fun of it, so we'd recommend picking a well-publicised event. It may have commentators and music, and fields of up to 10,000 runners. Still, there are advantages in going small, too: you'll probably find that a low-key event is easier in terms of travel and getting to the start, for instance.

Races are usually advertised in local sports centres, newspapers and running shops - but the best place to look is in the calendar section of this site.

## Train!

Nothing makes you more confident in a race than knowing you've done a little training for it. This might simply take the form of enough running practice to get you from start to finish, with or without walk breaks. Or, if you've got beyond that stage, you might inject a little pace into your run by practising speedwork.

Whatever training you do, you'll get the most motivation and encouragement by doing it with a friend or a running group. (This holds especially true for speedwork, which is fast, demanding running alternated with slow jogs or rests.) Finding some company is the first step. The second step is to decide on an achievable training plan that builds you up in realistic increments to the date of your race (allowing for one or two easier weeks at the end). If you can use a schedule from RUNNER'S WORLD, a good book, or an accredited coach at your local club, that's ideal. It will be a tried and tested routine that's safe and effective.

Otherwise, you can create your own schedules using the following principles. Whatever your approach, though, do try to plan in advance. That will mean you're more likely to go out and run, and that your routine will be sensible.

### **Build gradually:**

Don't increase your workload by more than three miles a week. If that means you won't have come close to your race distance by race day, think about re-scheduling your race for a few weeks later, or accepting the likelihood of needing to plan walk breaks on race day.

### **Be patient about introducing speedwork:**

Wait until you've been regularly running for 30-40 minutes, three or four times a week – probably at least 8-12 weeks. Then introduce very small amounts – as little as 5-10 minutes per week for the first few weeks (see below).

**Speedwork is critical once you're experienced enough:**

You don't have to be fast. All you need is an even, uninterrupted surface, preferably soft, such as short grass or a running track. It doesn't have to be a measured distance, but it's good to use the same location each week so that you can see your progression. See the schedules below for examples of speedwork, and consider adding relays and fartlek (10-30 minutes of random fast and slow bursts, from a few seconds to a few minutes each, during a normal run) for variety.

**Alternate hard and easy days:**

For beginners, most easy days will be days off running altogether. For other runners, the rule is simply not to schedule speedwork sessions or long runs on consecutive days.

**Have variety:**

A well-balanced week includes one faster session, one longer run (usually on Sundays, building up to 60-90 minutes for non-marathon training) and a number of slower runs, each lasting around 35-50 minutes. Experienced runners may add a second faster session – perhaps a 20-minute tempo run, or a different kind of speedwork from the first session.

## Enjoy the day

A bit of planning can make all the difference when it comes to racing. If you eat and drink properly over the weekend, allow yourself plenty of time on race morning, and think a little about pacing, you'll have an advantage over someone who's trained better but planned worse. Here's the ideal approach:

**The day before the race**

1. The most important thing to remember is to relax. You'll get round, and you'll look back on it and be proud, so don't fret.
2. Prepare all your race kit early (see 'Now where did I put it?', right). If you have your number already, pin it to the front of your race T-shirt. Double-check the start time and travel directions.
3. Decide on a race plan. If you're aiming for a specific time, work out your target mile splits for the race. Choose even splits or a slightly faster second half. Copy the splits upside down onto your number, or keep the plan with your kit and copy it onto your forearm when you arrive at the race.
4. Drink plenty (but steer clear of alcohol). Your urine should be almost completely clear. Have two glasses of water when you get up, and carry a bottle of water with you wherever you go. Have a tried-and tested pre-run supper, and if it's a long race (half-marathon or more), take special care to eat plenty of low-fat, high-carbohydrate food during the day, such as bread and pasta. But don't get bloated.
5. Don't plan a day of hectic shopping, gardening, or anything else that will keep you on your feet for most of the day. Revel in the opportunity to be lazy for a change: have a lie-in, watch some TV, sit in the garden and read a book – it really doesn't matter. Just relax.

**On the morning of the race**

1. Ideally, get up a couple of hours before you have to leave. Start with a shower to wake you up.
2. Drink 500-750ml of water to replace any fluids you have lost overnight.
3. Make sure you have breakfast. Your body will have burnt 400-600 calories overnight. These need to be replaced with easily digested foods (porridge, bread and honey or jam). Avoid anything greasy, heavy or that you know from experience leaves you bloated. If you can't stomach any solid food at all, use your usual high-carb energy drink to make up the necessary calories instead.

4. Head to the race. Aim to arrive 60-90 minutes before the start – just remember to factor in plenty of time if there may be parking difficulties or you have to collect your race number. This will give you time to use the loo, get changed, drop off your kit bag, find the start line, and warm up.
5. About 25 minutes before the race starts, do an easy 10-minute jog to warm up. Spend 5-10 minutes stretching lightly, and if you're feeling swift, finish it off with a few short strides (see 'Training', p21), then jog over to the start line (don't stand too close to the front unless you really plan to finish with the leaders).

### **In the race**

1. Don't go off too fast. It's the cardinal sin, and a mistake made even by experienced elite athletes. If you've made a pace chart of your mile splits, make sure that you follow it. A heart rate monitor can be a useful check, but only by trial and error over a number of races. (First observe your heart rate in a conservatively paced race, then try a slightly longer race at the same heart rate, or run the original race distance at a slightly higher heart rate next time.)
2. If things start to go wrong, don't worry – just ease down and assess how you actually feel. Take a walk break by all means, but limit yourself to a set time (eg a minute).
3. Walk through the drinks stations to ensure that you hydrate properly. For races over 10 miles, consider taking energy gels in a small bumbag to restock your energy reserves (or ask whether the organisers provide energy drinks – but in either case, practise using them in training first).
4. Enjoy the work. This will sound strange, but even if you're having a slow race, have fun. There will always be more races on other days. Be pleased that you're actually at a point where you can even contemplate this sort of activity.
5. Only speed up in the last mile (1-2km) for a 5K, two miles (3km) for a 10K, and three miles for a half-marathon.

## **The 3 p's**

At its core, performing well in a race is founded on three basic principles:

**Patience:** Both during a specific race – by working out a race plan and following it – and by thinking long-term. Racing to your full potential is unlikely to appear suddenly. Consider not only the pace of your next race, but races three, five, even 10 years down the road. Set yourself a goal for the year (new distance, new PB) and work steadily towards it.

**Pacing:** Race-day emotion and adrenaline can easily override judgement, especially early on in a race. Divide your race into sections and monitor your effort so that you build, rather than lose, momentum over the race as a whole.

**Pain management:** When the going gets tough, dig in. Talk yourself into keeping going. The trick is not pushing too hard, too early. There's a moment of truth in every race when you really dig deep, but you don't want to face it too soon. Ideally you want to put it off until you can visualise pushing strongly through the last stretch – whether that's 200m or a mile – without anything being able to hold you back.

## **Kit list**

Don't let missing kit ruin your race – here's what you need to take with you

- Race number
- 4 safety pins (plus spares)
- Race T-shirt or vest
- Shorts and/or tights
- Socks
- Race shoes
- Warm-up shoes if different
- Warm-up long-sleeve, tights, jacket and thin gloves if necessary
- Dry post-race clothes
- Race directions
- Mile splits
- Pre-race energy drink to sip
- Energy gels if the race is over 90 minutes
- Post-race drink and recovery snack