

# The 8 Keys To A Great Race

How to make race day go your way - guaranteed!

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Of course, you've trained solidly, practised your race pace, kept hydrated all weekend, had an early night and a good, tried-and-trusted breakfast... Here's what to do next to ensure race-day bliss...

## **1. Arrive early**

Racing is meant to be enjoyable. Tough, perhaps, but enjoyable. So don't stress yourself by arriving late on the big day. Aim to turn up an hour before the race start: this will give you plenty of time to collect your number if you have to, and warm up, stretch, use the loo and find out last-minute details about the course, the drinks stations and so on. Rushing is a waste of valuable energy, and missing the start gun wastes all the valuable training you've done for the race.

## **2. Stick with what's familiar**

Everything about your race should be as controlled as possible. An important event isn't the time for experiments. Make sure that the shoes you'll be racing in are comfortably worn in – the same goes for your vest, shorts and socks. Eat a familiar breakfast that you know you can run on, and if you're not sure about how early to eat it, do your experimenting well before race day (most runners need two to three hours).

Out on the course, play it safe if there are energy drinks at the feed stations. If energy drinks have a potential part in your race plan (they can be useful if you're running for 90 minutes or more), find out in advance what sort will be provided, and practise using them on training runs first.

## **3. Focus your mind**

Prepare your mind to race. Clear your mind of bills, bank statements and other worries. During your training you should form a routine that prepares you to run; it could be stretching, sitting quietly or even chanting a mantra. Do exactly the same prior to your race. Then have a moment of quiet away from others and assess precisely what you want to achieve in this race, how you want to start off, and what pace you want to run. Be scientific with these thoughts. Do not take too long, otherwise negative thoughts may creep in. Then calmly walk to the start.

## **4. Start slowly and carefully**

At the start, position yourself with people who appear to be of a similar ability to you. If you're a 10-minute miler and you start off with the five-minute milers you'll clog up the course and certainly set off faster than you should do. Experience will breed an instinct for where to position yourself.

At the gun, start moving as soon as you are able, flowing with the crowd until you can establish your own pace. Keep your hands up to maintain balance, keep your feet low to avoid tripping. If the race is not crowded resist the urge to sprint off at the start. It is easy to ruin a race by sprinting the first 200 metres.

## **5. Run an even pace**

There are several ways to pace yourself in a race, but the method considered most effective is

running at an even speed throughout. If, for example, you are aiming for eight-minute miling in a marathon, the first few miles will seem like a warm-up, but you should resist the temptation to speed up. Use a stopwatch and note the mile markers around the course to keep yourself on track. It can be worth aiming a little bit inside your target time when you calculate your pace plan – the only trouble with even pacing is that it doesn't allow you to build a cushion of time, so a lack of concentration can quickly put you behind your race pace.

### **6. Consider a negative split**

Another method is to start the race slowly, gradually pick up the pace, and finish fast. This is best for novices and those runners returning to races after a lay-off, and research suggests that a slower first half (a 'negative split') is the best route to a successful marathon. Many runners run better when they can get warmed up first with an easier pace, and pick up confidence as they start to overtake runners after a few miles. This may be the only choice if you are in a mass-participation event such as the London Marathon.

### **7. Accelerate late**

You're feeling good, you're running briskly but within your limits – so when should you put the pedal to the metal? In a 10K, wait until you've covered five miles before hitting the accelerator, or four and a half if you're really feeling good. In a half-marathon you can gradually step up your speed after eight miles or so. In a marathon, wait until the last two or three miles. If the race feels tough throughout, save your surge for the final 800-1200 metres, a short enough distance for a little mental toughness to be able to help you deal with a lake of lactic acid in your leg muscles.

### **8. Learn from poor performances as well as good ones**

You may train and plan to have the race of your life but sometimes it's just not your day. If you do have a disaster, don't dwell on it. Give yourself an hour to be upset, but during that time try to analyse what went wrong.

Afterwards, consult your training log to see if it holds an explanation. A break of two days may provide good reflection and the rest you need. Reconsider your goals – would a race of a different length suit you better? Whatever the reason, a bad race is not the end of the world. Cheer up and look ahead: there will be plenty of chances for redemption.