Track and Field

Coach C. Ring '01

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Running Basics: Racing

by Julia Malacoff
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Once you've got running form, terrain and distance down, it's time to consider the possibility of racing. Not all runners choose to participate in races, but for many, it can be incredibly fulfilling. Not only does racing give runners a specific goal to work toward within a set timeframe, but completing a race also fosters feelings of accomplishment. It can even stoke your passion for running, making you more likely to keep up with the habit.

Ahead, running coaches share how to prepare physically and mentally for a race, as well as what to keep in mind on race day — no matter your chosen distance.

The most important part of training for a race is deceptively simple: Spend time running. "It's easy to get distracted," says Molly Armesto, a running coach and founder of All About Marathon Training. "Fancy workouts, cross-training and speed sessions have their place in a training plan." But your running volume (or how many miles per week you run) is the strongest determinant of how well your race will go, she explains.

"Consistency is the key to becoming a better runner. You can't run just once a week and expect to feel great come race day," Armesto adds. She recommends at least three running days per week for all race distances.

As for how to build up your distance, it's best not to jump into a high-mileage training plan. "Build up from your current level at roughly a 10% mileage increase each week," Armesto recommends.

How much time you spend training depends on the race itself. "On average, you can train for a 5K race in as little as four weeks with no prior experience," says Alexandra Weissner and Cortney Logan, RRCA-certified running coaches and founders of bRUNch Running. "If you are looking to start with a marathon, you need to give yourself between 8–12 months to prepare."

Lastly, it's a good idea to include simulated race day runs in your training plan. "Test things out as much as possible: What you will wear, what you will bring with you along the way and what you will eat before, during and after the race," Armesto says. "This can give you a big confidence boost when you hit the starting line on race day knowing that you've done this once before."

Physically training for a race is key, but Armesto says it's also important to know your "why."

"Having a clear idea of why you are training and running a race can be the difference between success and failure," she notes. It can help to write out your purpose for running a race ahead of time — just be clear and specific.

"It should be powerful enough for you to say 'let's do this' when you don't feel like running,"

Armesto explains. "It should speak to you when running gets tough and you feel as if you can't keep going. Write it out, tape it up and refer to it often."

SLEEP AND EAT WELL

Armesto recommends avoiding eating or drinking anything your body isn't used to for 2–3 days before the race and especially on race day. Stick to foods you like and know your body does, too.

"Start going to bed early two nights before the race and even earlier than you think you should," Armesto recommends. "Quality sleep is beneficial to your body and will allow it to perform well."

PREP YOUR GEAR

Lay out what you'll wear on race day the night before, particularly if you have an early morning start.

Depending on the season, you may also want to wear more layers in the beginning of the race and shed them as you warm up. "If you have a sweatshirt or jacket that you are looking to donate, wear it to the start line and leave it on the side of the course," Logan says. "Many race organizers will donate any clothing found along the course."

And since you are shredding layers as you warm up, you may want to add some back on as you cool down. "Bring an extra pair of socks and more layers to put on after you cross the finish line," Logan suggests.

PLAN FOR EXTRA TIME

"The number 1 culprit of anxiety on race day is feeling rushed and worrying that you might not make it to the starting line in time," Armesto says. "Plan to get to the starting line at least 30 minutes before race time."

GET YOUR JITTERS OUT

"Moving in any way is great for dealing with race day jitters, as it helps to release some of the pent up energy you might be experiencing," Armesto says. She recommends doing dynamic stretching, dancing it out or even just walking around if you're feeling nervous before a race.

TALK YOURSELF THROUGH THE RACE

"Tell yourself things like 'I've got this, this is what I trained for' or 'I am going to feel great about accomplishing this tomorrow morning,'" Armesto suggests. These positive thoughts help crowd out any negative ones that crop up. "Stay mindful and in the moment and don't look too far ahead into the race."

DRINK THE WATER

Hydration stations are there for a reason, Weissner says. "Take a moment to always enjoy water or Gatorade at each hydration station, even if you're not parched. Electrolytes and water are your friends and will help you hit that PR. You may slow down for a few seconds, but it will benefit you in the long run."

Race day strategy ultimately depends on the distance you're running and your personal running level. Here's what to keep in mind for the most common distances.

5K

"Newer runners should plan to start slow, with the first mile being your slowest," Logan says. This allows your body to warm up. "Then as soon as you hit the second mile marker, push it. At mile marker three, push it even more."

On the other hand, experienced 5K runners should aim to push the pace from the start, according to Logan. "Find your pace from the beginning and work toward keeping it throughout."

10K

"If this is your first time running a 10K, break it down into two 5Ks," Weissner suggests. Take the first one a little bit slower, then aim for negative splits (running each mile faster than the last) for the second part of the race.

"For experienced runners, work on building your speed," Weissner says. The first one or two miles can be slower as you warm up, but then the goal is gain speed with each mile.

HALF-MARATHON

If available, find a pace group to run with. "The pacer will have all the splits for your finish time goal and will help you stay on track with little thinking," Logan says. "If there isn't a pacer, have a plan for how fast you are going to run each mile." This is where wearing a running watch can come in really handy. As always, make sure your earlier miles are a little slower. "You need to keep gas in the tank for those final miles," Logan adds.

If it's your first half, Logan recommends walking the water stations. As you get better at grabbing on the go, you may consider jogging through water stations.

If you plan to eat or use energy gels during the race, most will have some kind of gel or snack at the aid stations. "Try to enjoy a gel every 30–45 minutes," Logan says. "If gels aren't your thing, try gummy candies or nut butters."

MARATHON

"Running a marathon is more mental than physical," Weissner says. Of course, you want to train adequately, but it's crucial to get your mental game in check beforehand so you feel strong during the race.

Running with a pace group is ideal. "You get that built in support system, and someone else is watching the clock," Weissner points out.

Treat the first 3 miles as your warm up. "Take them easy and just have fun," Weissner says. "Once you hit 3, pick it up slightly to a steadier pace. If you are feeling amazing when you hit miles 18–20, see how much you can push it. At mile 25, this is your time to shine and give everything you've got left."

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While traditional road races are still popular, things seem to be shifting in the run racing world. "The number of participants in standard format races — 5Ks, 10K, half-marathons and full-marathons — went through the roof between 2005 and 2015," says Thomas Watson, a UESCA-certified running coach and founder of The Marathon Handbook. But that growth has stalled in the last year or two. "Although no definitive explanation has been identified for this recent dip, it's thought that the number of athletes isn't decreasing. Instead, runners are ditching traditional formats in favor of multi-activity events like Spartan races, Tough Mudders, trail races and triathlons."