

How to Run a Fast Marathon

By Rick Gwilt

The pretext for Mr Skuse handing me this writing assignment is that, in June 1982, I ran a 2.22 marathon. I've adopted the ambitious title partly because it reflects what Paul asked me for, and partly because one of the things that I learned in 2020 is that it's really quite OK to over-promise and under-deliver. In truth, I'm probably less of a role model than a cautionary tale, like an alcoholic visiting schools to warn of the evils of drink.

There was little in the lead-up to June 1982 to lead me (or anyone else) to expect that I would run that fast. I wasn't on any special diet or training regime. I had always had good natural speed, with best times on the track of 3.54 for 1500m and 8.28 for 3000m, but these times had been set in 1977. I had called time on my track career in 1979 and joined Salford Harriers, but had struggled to make the transition into a long-distance runner. On my first long training run with Salford, I had had to leave my watch with a garage attendant as security for a Mars bar, before I was able to complete the run. On another occasion, my club-mates had to re-route a training run over the moors to get me down onto solid ground. I'd achieved nothing of note in my first season with the club and I'd been injured for much of 1981.

In 1982, I was working as a lorry-driver, starting work at 7am but usually finished by late afternoon. Sometimes I would park my lorry up and go running in foreign parts before returning empty to the depot. I also had other distractions to fit my running around (trade union branch secretary, editor of a quarterly magazine etc). I was running about 50 to 60 miles a week, of which 15 to 18 took the form of a long, easy Sunday morning run with a mate or a group, leaving an average of 7 miles on the other days. I would try to mix these up between steady running and fartlek, but it was mainly about fitting them around the rest of my life. I trained once a day (I had briefly experimented with running to work at 6.30am, but it never felt comfortable, and I quickly came to regard it as junk mileage).

I was on a standard lorry driver's diet (full English breakfast, steak pudding and chips etc) except that I probably ate more than most. I used to burn up calories at a prodigious rate, so my main concern was always to get enough food down me. I ate huge quantities of bread.

I only entered the Manchester Marathon because everyone else in the Club seemed to be doing it. I had never even run a half-marathon before. If I had a target, it was to finish the race, although I had no plan to run at a controlled pace to achieve this. To me, running fast was what races were for. I followed the Ron Hill carbo-loading diet closely in the week before the race, but this was my only concession to science. I didn't even learn to drink on the move.

On race day I placed myself on the front of the grid mainly so I could watch the race unfolding, and once it started, I just settled down to enjoy the occasion, running through the city centre streets on the crest of a wave of 16,000 runners. I relaxed into a rhythm, gradually easing past a succession of runners, without really giving any thought to my position. It turned out I was in third place by the half-way mark, but I wasn't aware of it. Soon after this, the great Jeff Norman (best time 2.12) eased up alongside me, and we ran shoulder to shoulder up to the 20-mile mark. At this point, I started to tire and slow down while Jeff just kept going at the same pace. I finished two minutes behind him.

Although at the time, my performance seemed unexpected, I now believe there was at least one key predictor. I had been injury-free for 6 months, the longest such spell of my running career. I would now say that one of the prime objects of any good training programme has to be staying injury-free. Any potential gain from increasing training mileage or intensity has to be weighed against the scale of the potential setback to fitness resulting from an injury.

A possible contributory factor to this freedom from injury was that the physical demands of my day-job had lessened. My previous work had always involved handballing my loads, but my new contract was based on pallet-loads, so all I had to do was drive.

I also think that not having a race target helped me. Throughout the race I was mentally relaxed, oblivious to time and position, listening only to my body. At no point in my career did I find that setting a target made me more likely to achieve it.

In May 1983, I was expecting to run the Manchester race significantly faster, but it didn't happen. I lost focus in the run-up, with United involved in an FA Cup final and replay in the week before the race. I drank too much beer and my carbo-loading went to pot. It wasn't the only reason, but I ended up with a slower time (2.26), albeit in a higher position (4th). Then I got injured for most of the summer.

I got an invite to run the Toronto Marathon in October 1983, so I entered an obscure half-marathon race in rural Lancashire to test my fitness. I won it easily, which convinced me I was fit to run in Toronto, but in truth the opposition had been weak, the time meaningless (it was way over distance) and my fitness was questionable.

On the day, I was deceived by the weather conditions: the early start and the haze obscuring the sun disguised the fact that it was near 100% humidity and the temperature would rise to 38°. I had failed to drink enough before the race, and my sponge-sucking strategy was certainly no match for the occasion. I was well off the pace long before dehydration shut me down, and I ended up walking the last 6 miles in a daze.

I never attempted a marathon after that. I had found half-marathons much more amenable, and ran much more successfully at that distance during 1984 and 1985.

Much of my learning about distance running has come with the benefit of many years' hindsight, as well as talking with coaches like Brian Fox and Jeroen Peters. Brian once told me that he believed athletes reach their optimum fitness after around 18 months' uninterrupted training, which confirmed my belief in the importance of avoiding injury.

I would now say that there is nothing inevitable about "hitting the wall" at 20 miles in a marathon, as long as you keep hydrated. If you're sucking sponges, as I was, you're asking for trouble. I once had the experience of running the same 7-mile race on two occasions, three weeks apart. On the second occasion, I'd drunk a lot of beer the night before, and my time was 45 seconds slower. Be aware that alcohol dehydrates you. Stay hydrated, before, during and after the race.

You should not assume from my track times that speed is vital. Two of the runners in the marathon race I have described, Kevin Best (1st in 2.16) and Jeff Norman (3rd in 2.20) used to do virtually nothing but high training mileage at a steady pace. I knew I could beat them for speed, but they never gave me the opportunity in a long-distance race. If you want to run faster, it probably means you need to get fitter, so yes it helps if you can vary your level of effort in training, but not at the expense of injury. Fartlek is a good way to introduce variety without stress.

One thing I learned from my mistakes was to avoid wishful thinking about my level of fitness. Have I done the training? Am I fit enough? If not, why am I going ahead and

running? Is there a danger of becoming demoralised, or even worse injured? The thing I like about parkrun is you can give it a miss and never lose your entry fee.

These days I eat much more healthily, having reduced my intake of animal fats, sugars and alcohol. I'm not sure how much difference a healthy diet would have made to my racing, although I suspect a nutritionist would have had a field day with me. In my defence, I've always treated food as an energy source rather than a pastime, and I've never put on much weight while injured. What I would definitely say is that a disciplined approach to pre-race preparation is important. What you eat and drink in the days and hours before a marathon really matters.

Last but not least, be aware of what else is going on in your life and how that will interact with your running. Don't rely on sheer willpower. You may need to set priorities and make difficult choices. If you're going through a stressful time, try to make your running programme stress-free. If you think of life as an obstacle course, the most energy-efficient way to get through it is to avoid the hazards, not try to demolish them.

You've probably gathered that I'm wary of training schedules, although many runners swear by them. No two runners are the same. For me, guidelines and principles are fine, as long as they're not so tightly drafted that they induce you to ignore what your body is telling you. To quote an athlete I much admire, Kara Goucher, "Do the work. Do the analysis. But feel your run. Feel your race. Feel the joy that is running."