



Endurance Sports Training

Marathon Training Program for Your First Marathon

By Ben Wisbey

Coach – Endurance Sports Training

Endurance Sports Training offers individually written training programs for runners of all abilities. For more information please go to www.endurancetraining.com.au or contact Ben on bwisbey@endurancetraining.com.au

Training for your first marathon is always a daunting task. You are heading into the unknown. You know that both training and the marathon itself will be hard, but how hard?

First time marathon runners commonly want answers to the following three questions:

- What is the quantity of training required?
- How long should the long runs be?
- How many months is the ideal marathon preparation?

I will attempt to answer these questions in this article as well as outlining a marathon training program for the first time marathon runner.

Developing your Marathon Plan

Marathon training is focused on improving your aerobic endurance and strength endurance. These are the two key aspects of achieving your marathon goal.

If you are new to running I would suggest that you build through to a 5km, 10km and then a half marathon before attempting the full marathon. Marathon preparation requires a sufficient training background in order to cope with the training volumes, and therefore having some half marathon training under your belt will be very beneficial.

For those individuals stepping up to the marathon from this background, it is still recommended that you allow at least 18-20 weeks of consistent running in your preparation. The training program below represents an 18 week marathon preparation.

The beginning of the training program assumes that you are capable of comfortably completing 90 minutes of easy running. If this is not the case, gradually build up your long run to the 90 minute mark before commencing the training program outlined in this article.

Keep in mind that the program accompanying this article is a generic novice marathon training program. While it provides a good framework for which to follow, you will need to fine tune this program based on your individual needs. If you need assistance with your training program please visit www.endurancetraining.com.au

Training Program Description

Warm-up and Cooldown

All training runs should include a warm-up period at the start of the session and a cool down period at the finish of the session. These periods should be counted in the overall run duration as it is still time spent running.

Jog at a very low intensity for your warm-up and cool down. The warm-up should be at least 10-12 minutes long, and the cool down at least 10 minutes long. During the latter part of the warm up you should complete some drills as a form of dynamic stretching; these include high knees, butt kicks, bounding and short stride outs.

Session Types

Long Runs

A marathon is conducted over a long duration at a relatively low intensity. Long runs are therefore the key to your marathon success. Your long runs should be done over a hilly course and include a combination of soft and hard surfaces. As the event draws closer, gradually start making your long runs less hilly and run a greater portion of them on hard terrain, so that you get used to running on the road. Ideally you will want to build up your long run so that you complete one to two 36km runs.

Your long runs should be conducted at a moderate intensity. The pace of your long runs should range from 30seconds slower than goal race pace to goal marathon pace. Many first time marathon runners are capable of holding marathon goal pace throughout their long runs as it is the muscular fatigue of the marathon distance itself that is the limitation on race day, and not their running intensity.

All training session lengths are specified by duration rather than distance. Distance is a crucial factor in your long runs however, so for long runs the target distance is specified. The duration is also included as a guide for these sessions. If you take a longer or shorter period of time to complete the scheduled distance this is okay.

Recovery Runs

Recovery runs are easy, short jogs aimed at promoting recovery while still providing aerobic enhancement. They should be done at a low intensity over flat natural terrain. Don't worry about the pace of these runs; they should only ever be nice and easy. It can be beneficial to include some short surges in a recovery run, to loosen up your muscles and joints.

Medium Long / Aerobic Runs

Medium long runs are the sessions used to supplement the Sunday long run. Medium long runs are similar to long runs in terms of desired running pace. They should be completed over hilly courses.

Strides

Strides are simply a pickup or surge to an increased running speed. They are used to enhance your neuromuscular running performance. Strides to about 5km race pace should be interspersed with several minutes of easy running. Be sure to do strides on flat terrain, such as an oval.

Tempo Runs

Tempo runs are used to boost your strength endurance and anaerobic threshold. This allows increased speed to be maintained, as well as reducing muscular fatigue at your desired marathon pace. The intervals in these sessions should be conducted on a flat or slightly undulating course, and should only be started after a thorough warm up has been completed. The efforts should be done at about 10-15km race pace (or the maximal pace you could sustain for 1 hour) and a steady pace should be maintained. The recovery periods between intervals should be an easy jog.

Cruise Intervals

Cruise intervals are similar to tempo intervals in that they are completed at a firm intensity that is around anaerobic threshold intensity. The difference between the two types of intervals is that cruise intervals are significantly shorter and conducted at a slightly higher intensity, such as 8-10km race pace.

Strength Endurance Runs

Strength endurance is one of the keys to lasting the distance of a marathon and remaining fatigue resistant for as long as possible. The best method of developing strength endurance is through hill efforts- this is also a great method of increasing running economy.

The hill efforts should be done on a long hill of moderate grade and the intensity should be firm/hard. Attempt to maintain relatively long strides on the ascent as this will foster a greater improvement in strength due to greater force production. Once you reach the top of the uphill effort, simply turn and jog back down before immediately starting your next effort.

The hill chosen for this session should not be too steep; the ideal hill grade is between 4-6%. Steep hills do not lead to greater gain. The goal is to ensure that you get strength gains that transfer to flat running- a steep hill will require more vertical leg drive than horizontal.

On the days that require a tempo period prior to the hill efforts, simply add in a flat tempo period at a firm intensity. Attempt to get to the bottom of the hill at the completion of your tempo period, so you are able to immediately start your first hill effort.

VO2 Sessions

These intense sessions are used to improve VO2 max and maximal sustainable running speed. These characteristics may not seem so important for a first time marathon runner. By improving these aspects of your performance, however, you will improve your ability over shorter race distances. This in turn means that your marathon pace becomes a lower percentage of your top running speed, thus making it easier to maintain marathon pace from both a physiological and biomechanical view point.

VO2 sessions are best completed at a track or oval over the specified distance, with intervals being at about 3-5km race pace. The recovery between each effort should be an easy jog. These sessions are very demanding on the body.

Understanding the Program Layout

- All specified session durations (and distances) include the warm-up and cool down.
- Where the program specifies a total duration that appears greater than total time required for the warm-up, cooldown and main part of the session, make up the remainder of the time with easy aerobic running.

Meeting your individual Goals

The program outlined here is a generic program that may need to be customised to fit around your own individual schedule. The program can easily be adjusted with modifications made to the weekly outline and the training load as required.

You may also wish to address some individual weaknesses that are not addressed in this program, so be sure to use the program as a guide to your marathon training and fine tune to meet your individual needs.

With only four runs scheduled for most weeks, all sessions become quite important in achieving your marathon goal. If a session needs to be missed every now and then, the best session to cut is the Tuesday session as it is of the lowest priority for the overall training program.

Other Aspects of Preparation

Stretching

Attempt to stretch for about 10-15 minutes at the end of each session. Also put 20-30 minutes aside at least three times per week to stretch. Focus your stretching program on the following areas; hamstrings, hip flexors, calves, quadriceps, glutes and the back. Stretching can help minimise the chance of injury and fatigue by increasing the suppleness of your muscles.

Strength Training - weights

Strength training is a form of training that can be of great benefit to any runner. It has been shown to improve technique, reduce muscular fatigue while running, and it can even help in the prevention of injuries.

If you wish to add in some strength training to your program, it would be best to only include 2 sessions per week and with light weights. Strength training should never detract from your ability to feel fresh and perform well in your running training. With the severe demands of marathon training, most runners undertaking such training cut back or eliminate their weight training.

Cross Training

Cross training can provide a very useful means of increasing your weekly aerobic workload in a low stress manner. When used appropriately, cross training sessions can also enhance recovery.

Appropriate cross training sessions can be worked into your training around your running sessions. While these sessions can be of benefit, it is the running sessions that will be the main benefit in achieving your marathon goal. In the training program accompanying this article, one cross training session is scheduled per week. The type of exercise that this involves is up to you but the two modes of exercise that will best accompany your running are cycling and sessions on the elliptical trainer. Other types of exercises such as swimming can also be extremely useful. Whatever type of exercise you chose for these sessions, ensure it is low impact and completed at a low to moderate intensity.

Races

While the marathon training program for first time marathoners does not include any races, some short races may be beneficial to your marathon preparation. If you wish to include the odd 5 to 10km event on the weekend then this will slot in quite well during the later half of the program.

If this race is on a Saturday then simply have the Friday run session off and do the race, with the long run on the Sunday.

If the race is on a Sunday, then you cannot afford to lose a long run. So the best approach is to warm-up, do the race and then run out the remainder of the scheduled distance at a low intensity.

One half marathon in your preparation would also work in well, ideally 4-8 weeks out from the marathon. As these events are generally on Sundays, this race could replace your scheduled long run.

Nutrition and Hydration

Nutrition is a very important area for all runners, especially those training for a long event such as the marathon. Due to the high volume of training required nutrition can have major impacts on your training and racing performance.

Prior to the marathon itself, you should undertake 2-3 days of carbohydrate loading, during which time carbohydrate based energy dense foods should be eaten, as well as increasing your overall food volume intake. Consult a dietician for an individual carbohydrate loading plan.

Race day itself is also vital from a nutritional point of view. A good race nutrition plan can mean the difference between a good and bad race, so the value of this aspect of preparation cannot be understated.

Your nutritional plan during the race should focus on carbohydrate intake. Develop a strategy for ingesting the target amount of carbohydrates, through consuming sports drinks, sports gels and other high energy snacks such as lollies. Regular intake of carbohydrates is recommended throughout the event, with carbohydrates being consumed every 30-45 minutes.

Fluid intake is a separate issue and will be dependant to some extent on the temperature. The general recommended intake is 350-700mL of fluid per hour. Hotter conditions will obviously demand a greater fluid intake, while carbohydrate intake will be similar in all weather conditions. For this reason, the amount of water intake will alter while sports drink intake will be similar in all conditions.

Endurance Sports Training provides the services of experienced sports dietician Greg Cox, who offers individually written carbohydrate loading, and race day nutritional plans. For more information on this service please contact us.

Pacing the Marathon

When race day comes around, the two key issues during the race are your nutritional plan (as discussed above) and your pacing strategy throughout the marathon.

As your primary goal is to finish the event, the most important thing is to reach the 30km mark in relatively good shape. The last 10-15km is always going to be tough, with fatigue setting in. For this reason you should plan on running the first half of the marathon quite conservatively so that you can hold onto a comfortable pace in the later stages.

As a general guide you should aim at completing the first half of the marathon in approximately 48% of your goal marathon time. So if you feel that 4 hours is what you are capable of, then you should aim to go through the 21km mark in 1:55 - 1:56. Your pacing plan may need to be altered depending on the course profile.

General Training Load

The overall training load scheduled in this program, including the long run distance, is the minimum recommended volume required in order to complete a marathon. If you are comfortable completing longer mid-week runs and slightly longer long run on the weekend, then do so.

Conclusion

There is little doubt that your marathon preparation will be tough and at times you may feel that your goal is overwhelming. However if you follow the outlined program and are willing to do the hard work then you will be physically capable of completing the marathon. While completing a marathon is definitely a tough challenge, it is a very achievable goal by all individuals who have a semi-established running background, and are capable of performing the required long runs. Good luck with your marathon training.

For a marathon training program for the more experienced runner, and including a greater weekly training load please visit the articles section of www.endurancetraining.com.au

Ben Wisbey offers triathlon and run coaching services tailored to your individual needs. For more information go to www.endurancetraining.com.au or email Ben at bwisbey@endurancetraining.com.au