

Get Serious: A 12-Week Marathon Training Plan

Do the speedwork first and build endurance later? Is that any way to train for a marathon? Yes, say some of the world's best runners. This 12-week plan turns the typical training program upside down--with incredible results.

By **Scott Douglas**

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The one thing that spooks every marathoner is the Wall--that lovely point late in the race where [glycogen](#), your muscles' preferred fuel, is used up, and you slow dramatically. Or, at best, struggle dramatically.

Consequently, for most of us, training for a marathon boils down to one thing: pushing out that point at which we hit the Wall. The theory being, if we push it out far enough in training, we won't smack into it in the race. In the great majority of [marathon-training plans](#), runners try to accomplish this by first building endurance with long runs, and then, as race day approaches, by "sharpening" with shorter, faster intervals.

However, many top runners and coaches think there's a better way. They say the standard method doesn't train you to become highly efficient at burning glycogen at marathon race pace. "The physiology of the marathon is completely different from the physiology of shorter races," says Renato Canova, who coaches many top Kenyans, including former Boston and ING New York City Marathon winner Rodgers Rop. For these shorter events, says Canova, "the goal of training is to improve the power of the human engine" so that you can run faster. Because you're not going to use up your glycogen stores even in a half-marathon, "there's no need to pay attention to fuel consumption," he says.

For the marathon, however, "the goal of training is to reduce the consumption of fuel at race pace," Canova says. When you become more efficient at [marathon pace](#), you burn less glycogen per mile and theoretically have enough to maintain your goal pace to the finish. That's certainly how it has worked out for Rop, along with U.S. champions Alan Culpepper, Scott Larson, and Steve Spence.

So what training do these runners do that's different from the norm? Brad Hudson, who advises Culpepper and Larson, picks up on Canova's metaphor this way: "First, build the engine with the shorter, faster workouts that many marathoners do only when sharpening for the race. Then, while keeping your mileage up, fine-tune the efficiency of the engine, with lots of running at marathon pace." That is, you switch the phases of a traditional marathon-training plan.

"The benefit of this approach is that you get your body as fit as you can first, then you get as efficient as you can," says Culpepper, who prepared this way for the 2004 U.S. Olympic Marathon Trials, which he won, and for last year's Boston Marathon, where he finished fourth. "In the three weeks before the race, it's hard to get much fitter--you make only small improvements--but you can get your body used to working within a certain zone that improves how efficiently your body burns fuel in the race."

Exercise physiologist David Martin, Ph.D., who advised Spence before Spence won a World Championship bronze, says, "This approach makes you very strong, so that a submaximal effort like marathon pace feels easy. Think about when you shake a weightlifter's hand. It hurts like hell to you, but because he's so strong from harder efforts, he doesn't realize how much force he's using."

To implement this approach at an upcoming spring marathon, check out the following 12-week schedule we developed in consultation with Hudson. It's exactly the sort of training program used so successfully by Spence, Culpepper, and others, but we adapted it just for you.

A Few Things You Should Know

How to read the schedule: This program culminates with your marathon at the end of the 12th week. For each week, it lists the two key workouts to do, with the understanding that you'll space the workouts out rather than do them on consecutive days.

Why the schedule looks like it does: This schedule doesn't list every run for the week; rather, just the two key workouts. Some of you will want to sprinkle in easy runs on the other five days; others will only do two other runs. That's up to you. Most people do long runs on weekends, but if you'll have more time and energy on, say, Wednesdays, do them then.

The schedule also states weekly mileage in terms of percentage of peak. So, for example, if you plan to max out at 50 miles a week, match that figure with the percentages in the first column of the schedule to see how much to run that week (e.g., 50 miles in week 10, 25 miles in the last six days before the marathon).

Before starting the schedule: Your weekly mileage should be at least 20 to 30 before starting. If you feel overly fatigued or have acute soreness in a particular spot after the first week, this is a sign you're not ready. Back off and build your mileage a bit more. This program will be especially

effective if you've recently been running short races.

Steady long run: This schedule generally alternates between two types of long runs. With the first, the steady long run, the bulk of it is run 10 percent slower than MP. For example, if your MP is 8:00 per mile, you would do most of this long run at 8:48 pace (8:00=480 seconds; 10% of 480=48; pace for this run=MP (480) + 10% (48)=928 seconds per mile, or 8:48). Use the first few miles of these long runs to warm up, then spend the rest of the run at the prescribed pace. The honest pace on these long runs will increase your fuel-burning efficiency, but it's not so intense that it'll kill you for the rest of the week.

Progression long run: The second type of long run you'll be doing is a progression long run, in which you run the bulk of it at your normal training pace. With 40 minutes to go, start to pick up the pace so that your last 30 minutes look like this: Ten minutes at marathon pace (MP) + 20 seconds per mile; then 10 minutes at MP + 10 seconds per mile; and the final 10 minutes at MP. For example, if you're training to run 8:30 pace in your marathon, in the last half hour of a progression run you would hit 8:50 pace for 10 minutes, then 8:40 pace for 10 minutes, and then 8:30 pace for the last 10 minutes. **Where to run:** When possible, do your long runs and MP work on terrain that mimics that of your marathon. At the start of the schedule, do some of your key workouts on the track or other calibrated courses so that you can be sure you're hitting the right pace.

Recovery periods: How fast you run between sessions of tempo or MP running is key to this program's effectiveness. The pace of your recovery running should be steady training pace. If this hardly seems like a recovery, remember that MP shouldn't feel so hard that you need drastic amounts of recovery after a few miles of it. As your MP workouts get easier, says Hudson, increase the pace of your recovery effort, not the pace of the MP segments. The longer you work at MP with short rest, the more prepared you'll be to hold that pace for 26.2 miles.

Strides: Plan to do 10 X 100-meter pickups after one of your easy runs each week. These short bursts of controlled, fast running help you to run with better form at all paces. To do a stride, accelerate to near full speed while staying as relaxed as possible. Take as much rest between strides as you need to run the next one with good form.

The rest of the week: Again, fill in the rest of the week with easy running. As your hard days get harder and increasingly focused on sustaining marathon pace, the pace on your easy days should get easier. One way to ensure that you're truly recovering on your easy days is to wear a heart-rate monitor and not go above 70 percent of your maximum heart rate.

Pacing Guidelines

Tempo pace = 10 to 15 seconds per mile slower than your 10-K race pace, or roughly 10-mile or half-marathon race pace. Do these workouts at as even a pace as possible.

MP = marathon pace, the per-mile pace you hope to run in the marathon. In these workouts (and in the marathon), run as close as possible to this pace for each mile (rather than, for example, running one mile 10 seconds faster than MP, the next 10 seconds slower than MP, and then saying that you averaged MP).

week	% weekly mileage	key workout 1	key workout 2
one	75	3x1.5 miles at tempo pace, with a steady half-mile recovery between repeats	Steady long run of 13 miles (at 10% slower than MP)
two	85	2x2 miles at tempo pace, with a steady half-mile recovery between repeats	Progression long run of 16 miles
three	95	4-mile tempo run	Steady long run of 15 miles (at 10% slower than MP)
four	75	3x2 miles at MP, with a steady half-mile recovery between repeats	5-K or 10-K race or time trial
five	100	3x2 miles at MP, with a steady half-mile recovery between repeats	Progression long run of 18 miles
six	75	3x2 miles at MP, with a steady half-mile recovery between repeats	15-K or half-marathon race
seven	90	3x2 miles at tempo pace, with a steady half-mile recovery between repeats	Progression long run of 20 miles
eight	100	5x2 miles at MP, with a steady half-mile recovery between repeats	Steady long run of 16 miles (at 10% slower than MP)
nine	75	3x3 miles at MP, with a steady half-mile recovery between repeats	Progression long run of 22 miles
ten	100	2x4 miles at MP, with a steady half-mile recovery between repeats	Steady long run of 18 miles (at 10% slower than MP)

elev	85	2x3 miles at tempo pace, with a steady half-mile recovery between repeats	15 miles, with last 8 to 10 miles at MP. Note: Do this run early in week 11.
twelve	50 (not counting the marathon)	8 miles, with last 3 miles at MP	Marathon

Spence's Splendor

Elite runners have been using the "inverted" training approach since the 1980s, and Steve Spence (right) used it to become the top American marathoner of the early '90s. "After five marathons in which I was reduced to a walk late in the race, I began looking for another way," Spence says.

"In 1990, I was in fourth place at Boston at 23 miles and on 2:10 pace, but ended up 19th in 2:16. My agent sent me an article outlining [1988 Olympic Marathon champ] Gelindo Bordin's marathon-training regimen, which utilized Renato Canova's theories. I figured the plan would give me the endurance I needed, while sustaining speed as well." It worked. "My first race using this approach was the Columbus Marathon in 1990--a race that I won in my personal best of 2:12:17," says Spence. The breakthrough was followed by a bronze medal in the 1991 World Championships and a victory in the '92 U.S. Olympic Marathon Trials.

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