



Forever Run

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Any Healthy Person Can Run a Marathon

by

Jeffrey Race

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Jeffrey passing the Capitol during the 2010 Marine Corps Marathon.

We run for different reasons. As a "relaxational" jogger for many years I

decided to take up marathon running in my 60s as I wanted to see what was happening to my body with advancing age. Marathons are a good way to do this since we really learn about something only when we push toward its limits. I also wanted to introduce my active (but non-runner) 18-year-old daughter to the benefits of running. So we trained together for our first marathon, during which we learned many interesting and some unexpected things, which I am happy to be able to share with you here. This is just one person's experience, so evaluate it against the experience of other runners and as it applies to your own body.

An unexpected conclusion from my experience is that any healthy person can run a marathon, even though most people (even some runners) consider it a daunting challenge. The challenge is actually not the run but the preparation. Here let me provide you some details.

An important caution: it's wise to consult with your doctor and to undergo a stress test before you take up marathon running. I made it to 12 minutes on the treadmill still with 95% blood oxygen level, no cardiac arrhythmia, and 175 peak heart rate. My doctor said I was "good to go."

Marathons Differ from Shorter Runs

Marathons differ from shorter runs both in impact on our body and in demands upon it. Many friends had to give up running due to knee damage, so when I started long runs I was keen to learn how to keep going into old age. A bit of research revealed that knee damage is exacerbated by the exaggerated impact on the knees from popular brands of running shoes which force an unnatural hind foot rather than forefoot initial impact. Humans are designed to run, and if you run a few steps as early humans did you will see they fell on the forefoot, which cushions the concussive force on the knee. I decided to train barefoot.

Fortunately at the time I was living in Bangkok whose Polo Club offers

a field surface perfectly maintained, perfectly smooth, and perfectly free of anything which might injure an unshod foot. I began running a mile at a time, gradually building up to half marathon distance barefoot on the grass. My feet felt great and I continue to run barefoot while abroad (several months each year).

However an American marathon means running on cement in protective shoes so I researched the possibilities. I tried the Vibram Fivefingers soon after its first release but had to give it up because my second toe is (unusually) longer than my great toe. An American friend (an expert Thai boxer!) recommended the Newton line which I've used ever since because its design promotes impact on the forefoot. I sometimes use the Nike Free or the Altria for training. The right shoes and socks are the most important equipment decision in order to avoid injury (like bloody feet and lost toenails, which you'll sometimes see on first-time marathon runners).

Marathons also differ from shorter runs in demanding much more energy than we carry as we cross the starting line. In training this means carrying energy bars and consuming an average of about 150 calories per mile plus hydration to facilitate nutrient absorption. But one need carry no food or water on a well organized race as these will be provided along the way. (But check first! On my first long race - a half-marathon in Bangkok - not only was there no food or water--there were no toilet facilities either, providing some exciting moments in the bushes along the course.)

A third and very important difference is the challenge to the body, especially the feet. It's very important to get a snug but not slipping fit of the shoe, which you can test only by long runs in candidate shoes and socks. I wear very thin socks when I run in my Newtons. I recently tried an Altra but they are too loose for a marathon though they are OK for my shorter mid-week runs.

My Training Regime

I usually run an October marathon so I start training around July by running along the rail trail from Davis Square in Somerville toward Lexington. I begin with a four-mile run on the first Sunday, building up two miles each week until six weeks later I run the entire fifteen mile route out to Lexington and back. So for two and a half months I run 15 miles each Sunday and a shorter run at mid-week. This was a routine I learned from a much more experienced distance runner at the Polo Club in Bangkok: train to the point where you're not tired after a half-marathon, and you'll do fine at a full marathon distance. Since my goal is just to stay healthy and keep running marathons into my 80s, and to measure my body against a challenge, I don't run fast.

Preparations for the Race

Experience has taught me to consume a non-fibrous meal the night before (spaghetti is usually recommended) and a non-fibrous breakfast several hours prior to race time so you can clear your system before starting the race. I wear a hat, Bermuda shorts and a racing T-shirt and in really cold weather (February on Cape Cod) a windbreaker which I remove after a mile since I become so hot. I tie my windbreaker around my waist to put back on at the end of the race. I take a Tylenol as the race starts and another every seven miles (check with your doctor).

Running the Race

Boredom is my biggest marathon challenge as I don't try to run fast so the choice of course is important to me. Jasmine and I ran the Marine Corps Marathon which is a terrific experience because it is so well organized and one passes such gorgeous

spots as the White House, the Capitol and the Smithsonian Institution. All along the way bands play, people cheer, at the end a Marine lieutenant places a medal around your neck, and there is a recovery area with massages and plenteous food. For our 2010 race applications were still taken for three days; by three years ago all 35,000 slots were gone in 45 minutes of the website's opening minute, and now that marathon running has become so popular one actually has to join a lottery even to have a chance to run the Marine Corps Marathon. So the last several years I've run on Cape Cod and in Rhode Island at Newport and Narragansett, which are well organized, less expensive, and more convenient to Boston. But beware: the second half of the Newport course is hills!

At Narragansett in 2015, I was the sole 70+ entrant in a total field of 270 runners!

Conclusion

People are often amazed that I have been a marathon runner since my mid-60s, but in fact there's no cause for amazement or even surprise if you look below the surface. I have always been physically active, earlier mainly with figure skating, but never a competitive runner. To run marathons I use only ordinary human capabilities. Anthropologists tell us that we homo sapiens began as a relatively small number of emigrants to the Middle East from Africa -- perhaps only ten thousand or less. Now billions of us dominate the globe as the world's super predator. Our intelligence helps, but that could manifest only because we could get enough protein to support our big and active brains. That we got because we are built to outrun any other animal: not faster but farther. That innate capability is what I rely on to make it alive to a 26.2 mile finish line. And any healthy reader who gets his doctor's OK and trains simply as I did can do it too. Try it!



Jeffrey (with red shirt and barefoot) at the Polo Club in Bangkok, Thailand.

NE 65+ Takes Home Awards at USATF-NE Banquet

by Dan D.