



# Lessons Learned!

A marathon presents you with 26.2 miles of opportunity. Sidestep these 10 common training and racing mistakes to have a great day BY LISA MARSHALL

**JUST HOURS AFTER** completing a recent marathon, I raised a bittersweet toast to a race I was already eager to forget. Training for it had cost me countless pancake breakfasts with my kids, and attending it nearly emptied my bank account. But instead of basking in the PR I'd promised my running buddies, I flashed back to futile porta-potty stops, wardrobe malfunctions, and a scary midrace bonk. How did I go so wrong?

You don't have to be new to racing to mess up. I've run seven marathons and 12 halves, and I've heard many more experienced runners say even *they* have stepped into the same common pitfalls that ruined races for me. But I've had enough. After consulting with good coaches, I now have a game plan to avoid these blunders next time out. Read on and be the beneficiary of my mistakes.

## MISTAKE #1 I TRAINED WRONG

As a native Coloradan, I have long assumed my mountain-girl lungs would have me feeling downright bionic at sea level. But it turns out running trails at altitude in subfreezing temps is not the best way to train for humid low-elevation road races that can get surprisingly warm midcourse. Duh. "That's one of the biggest mistakes I see people make," says Henry Guzman, a Boulder, Colorado, coach who has run 101 marathons. "If you don't train for the conditions you're going to be racing in, your body won't know how to adapt to the course or to the terrain."

### LESSON LEARNED TAILOR YOUR TRAINING TO YOUR EVENT

If you're traveling to an event, there's not a lot you can do to control elevation and

climate changes. But you can study the surface, average weather, and elevation of your event, and plan your training accordingly, says David Manthey, a coach





with Runner's Edge of the Rockies: "Training specificity is key."

For instance, runners targeting a road race should do at least 65 percent of training (most long runs and some speed sessions) on asphalt. This gets your body used to the pounding and repetitive motion of running on the roads. Hitting trails and park paths for easy and recovery runs and some hill workouts helps you avoid overuse injuries, says Manthey.

If your race is in warmer climes, do a few long training runs in the hotter part of the day, wearing extra layers. When Chris Clark of Anchorage was training for the 2000 Women's Olympic Marathon Trials—which would take place in Columbia, South Carolina—she did long runs of up to 20 miles on a treadmill, with the heat cranked up and the fan off. (It worked: She won the Trials.)

Elevation changes prove more logistically challenging: Ideally, those who live above 6,000 feet should try to drive to lower elevations for a few marathon-paced long runs. Flatlanders preparing for a higher-altitude race should get up high for a few training runs. High-intensity hill workouts can also help you get used to being oxygen-deprived. And be realistic: Lower your goal time by 10 to 30 seconds per mile for a flat course above 5,000 feet—and even more for a hilly route.

**MISTAKE #2  
I GOT PSYCHED OUT**

Because I am a resident of Estes Park, Colorado, you might assume I have a home-field advantage in our local marathon. Indeed, many experts say training on the actual course is ideal physical and mental preparation for what you'll face come race day. But I felt like I knew too much. Miles before the dreaded climb around mile 17, my body and psyche were already revolting in anticipation. I surged on an early downhill, and then slowed way down on a relatively flat stretch before the big climb, two voices in my head arguing over whether I should bank time or save energy. By the time I faced that hill, my quads were trashed and my momentum was sapped by nerves. It ended up being one of my slowest finish times ever.

**LESSON LEARNED PREP BODY AND MIND**

Study the course's profile, and plan workouts to match the terrain you'll encounter. If you're training for a hilly race, spend one day a week training on uphill and downhill. "You need to learn how to run smoothly and efficiently going downhill so you can absorb shock with your quads better," says Sean Coster, a Portland, Oregon-based coach and exercise physiologist, "and also learn how to transition into running uphill when you're eccentrically fatigued from running downhill." Incorporate strength-training exercises, like lunges and squats, into your routine, and do a few hill repeats at the end of a run when you're already tired.

To counter dread, use visualization and mantras. A couple of weeks before race day, picture yourself running up your hill with strength and power, "picking your knees up, pumping your arms, and breathing deeply," says sports psychologist Kay Porter, Ph.D., author of *The Mental Athlete*. Establish a mantra like "strong" or "powerful." Plan to draw on those images and words. Once the gun goes off, take your race one mile at a time. "People get ahead of themselves and freak out," says Porter. "Try to stay in the moment."

**MISTAKE #3  
I DIDN'T FUEL UP**

Distracted by glorious views, rockin' Zydeco bands, or spectators bearing cowbells, I have been known to let more than 13 miles go by before popping my first chews. At one race, I figured I'd save my Turbo Double Espresso shot until I really needed the jolt. But by the time that need reared its head—in the form of a weird, presumably low-blood-sugar-induced tingling in my face—it was too late.

"Once you dig yourself into a hole, it's very hard for your body to catch up," says Kim Mueller, M.S., R.D., C.C.S.D., a 2:52 marathoner and founder of San Diego-based Fuel Factor Nutrition. It's hard to restock your tank because it takes oxygen to digest food and to pump blood to your muscles. "A lot of runners overwhelm the gut and end up with all those calories swishing around in there making them nauseous," Mueller says.

**LESSON LEARNED TRAIN YOUR EATING**

During training, experiment with pre-run and on-the-run fueling, and once you establish what you can handle, stick with what works. Mueller recommends eating 75 to 125 grams of carbs for breakfast (like a white bagel, or low-fiber cream of wheat cereal and a banana). If you will have hours on race morning before the gun goes off, down an energy bar two hours before the start and nurse your sports drink all the way to the corral. The average runner burns roughly two-thirds of her body weight in calories every mile, says Mueller. Take your first fuel at the 10-K mark and aim to replace 25 to 30 percent of the total calories you burn between there and the finish. For a 150-pound runner, that's 500 to 600 calories (or five to six gels).



**MISTAKE #4  
I ARRIVED LATE**

En route to an East Coast race, I listened to rain pelt the airport rooftop for seven hours before I caught a connecting red-eye that got me to my hotel just before sunrise the day before the race. I had slept zero hours that night—the night that coaches say matters most, since nerves keep most of us awake on race eve. "People try to cut it too close and end up spending all their prerace energy being stressed out," says Star Blackford, a Clif Bar pace team leader and veteran of 140 marathons.

**LESSON LEARNED GET THERE EARLY**

Traveling to a race? It can take more than 24 hours for your body to recover from



the swelling and dehydration that a pressurized airplane cabin can yield, says Guzman. To keep it to a minimum, shun alcohol and caffeine—both diuretics—bring your own water, and wear compression socks on the plane. Arrive at least 48 hours before the start so you have time to do a 30-minute shakeout run, get a good night's sleep, spend a few hours at the expo, and lounge the night before the race. (For cheapskates like me, consider staying at an inexpensive hotel by the airport the first night.)

Racing close to home? You want to arrive an hour before the start so you can pick up your number, check your gear, hit the porta potty, and be in your corral 20 to 30 minutes before the gun goes off—so you don't waste precious glycogen stores sprinting to the start. (Been there.)

**MISTAKE #5  
I ATE TOO MUCH**

There's nothing like an all-you-can-eat buffet of cheese-soaked ziti to inspire a sense of calorie entitlement in a marathon runner. "I'm carb-loading," I rationalized before one 26.2-miler. The next day, despite my typically foolproof ritual of strong coffee and morning headlines, the buffet stayed with me, making my stomach slosh and my waistband chafe all the way to the finish line.

No surprise there, says Mueller. Fat (including that in cheese and in creamy or high-fat-meat sauces) slows digestion. "So if you go to bed after a rich, heavy

meal, you are going to wake up with nerves and a bunch of undigested food in your gut." At best, it can weigh you down. Or it may require an unplanned pit stop.

**LESSON LEARNED LOAD UP PROPERLY**

After months of training, a runner's glycogen—or blood sugar—stores are depleted to about 50 to 60 percent of normal. In order to sustain energy for three, four, or more hours, they must be topped off—which means carb-loading starting 72 hours out (not the night before). Eat four grams of carbohydrates per pound of body weight per day. For a 130-pound woman, that would be 520 grams. Your diet should consist of 80 to 90 percent carbohydrates.

Steer clear of high-fiber foods, like nuts, seeds, fruits with the peel on, and juice with pulp—all of which tend to leave a residue in the gut. Choose instead bananas or melons; creamy (not crunchy) peanut butter; pulp-free juice; and white foods like rice, bread, and pasta. "Prerace is the one time I recommend white over wheat because of its low fiber content," says Mueller. Finally, the day before the race, make your lunch your biggest meal so you have plenty of time to digest.

**MISTAKE #6  
I DRESSED ALL WRONG**

My long, reddish curls can take on a life of their own, so I take headwear seriously. On one unfortunate destination marathon morning, my beloved purple ban-



**PACK SMART**

A billed cap blocks the sun's glare.

dana went missing, forcing me to wear a hot, black, cotton baseball cap. By mile eight it was saturated with sweat, but because it was adorned with pins from previous races, I couldn't bear to chuck it. With hat in one hand and a water bottle in the other, I ran the rest of the race squinting, my sunglasses on my head in a failed attempt to keep my humidity-crazed locks out of my face. Twice I had to pull over to tighten the shirt and the jacket tied around my waist—a product of race-morning indecision and refusal to part with spendy garments.

**LESSON LEARNED BRING LAYERS**

Before you travel, make a list of everything you plan to bring, down to extra shoelaces if that's the minutiae you're into—and cross it off as you stow it. "I pack three different outfits: my hotter-than-blazes outfit, my 'Where did this cold front come from?' outfit, and a pair of capris and a lightweight long-sleeve shirt for something in the middle," says Blackford. Bring a visor for a hot day, a brimmed cap for a sunny but temperate day, and a light tech-fabric beanie for a cold one. Worried about temperature fluctuations over the course? Consider arm warmers or one lightweight long-sleeve top you can tie around your waist.

Aside from your base layer, do not wear expensive clothes or things with sentimental value. It's better to be too cold

**A Good Pace to Run a Marathon**

EASE IN, PICK IT UP, AND THEN HOLD ON, SAYS COACH DAVID MANTHEY

DURING...	RUN...
Mile 1	60 seconds slower than goal pace
Mile 2	30 seconds slower than goal pace
Mile 3	15 seconds slower than goal pace
Miles 4-5	Settle into goal pace
Miles 6-13	Gently pick it up to 5-10 seconds faster than goal pace
Miles 14-20	5-10 seconds faster than goal pace
Miles 21-25	Try to hold on to goal pace
Miles 25-26.2	Dig deep and finish strong!



than too hot. “Ten minutes of moving and you are going to wonder why you’re wearing all this stuff,” says Guzman.

**MISTAKE #7  
I GOT COLD AND WET**

After a few days of rain or even a crisp morning dew, the soft grasses that surround many a race starting line or athletes’ village can be transformed into a muddy sea of goo. At races that have required me to arrive at the start hours before the gun went off, I have looked longingly at runners sprawled out stretching and meditating on Hefty bags they had brought. I once waited for a group to have their wave called and poached their make-shift tarp from the garbage—along with a trashy tabloid to keep my mind off what lay ahead.

**LESSON LEARNED BRING A SURVIVAL KIT** Big Sur, New York, Boston, and Grandma’s all have notoriously long morning waits. And if you’re smart, you’ll arrive early no matter where you are running. Bring a plastic trash bag to sit on, a newspaper or magazine to read, and some throwaway sweats to keep warm—most big races now collect clothes for homeless shelters.



**GEAR TO GO**  
Bring stuff to ease the prerace wait.

**MISTAKE #8  
I WENT OUT TOO FAST**

I admit it. This is, and has always been, my tragic downfall. Whether it’s a massive metropolitan race with 25,000 fellow runners or a quaint mountain run with

250, the frenetic energy at the start is irresistible. Throw in an elevation drop at the start, and I am doomed. At one recent mountain marathon, I burst out of the gate with a joyful surge and didn’t realize until around mile three that I was two minutes ahead of where I should have been. Yes, I should have been alarmed. But for a proud instant, I thought, *Cool!* By mile six, I longed for a nap.

**LESSON LEARNED HOLD BACK. SETTLE IN. FINISH STRONG**

Many runners have a tendency to want to “bank time” at the beginning. “That is the absolute worst way to run a race,” says Manthey, “because you burn through your glycogen stores early on.” Instead, think of the first few miles as an extended warmup, and run them slightly slower than goal pace (see “A Good Pace to Run a Marathon,” on page 50, for a finish-strong pacing strategy). If you reach mile one significantly slower than goal pace, don’t panic, says Suzanne Walmsley, a coach with the Boston Athletic Association Running Club. “You have plenty of miles to make up that time.”

**MISTAKE #9  
I HYPED THE FINISH**

On a rare occasion when my husband got to travel with me to a race, I thought he could cheer wildly as I crossed the finish, then sweep me off to a nearby watering hole for a celebratory ale. I am told that he did, actually, see me cross. But I did not see him for nearly 90 minutes. Instead, I joined a crush of sweaty finishers for a grueling march toward Gatorade, a Mylar blanket, and a medal, after which we rounded a corner en route to the family meeting area straight into a blast of wind. Meanwhile, my dear husband had to walk a dozen blocks to get around the barricaded finish line. By the time he reached me, crumpled under my silver blankets trying to call him on a borrowed cell, I had melted into a delirious puddle.

**LESSON LEARNED MAKE A POSTRACE PLAN**

Scout out a separate meeting place within walking distance of the finish and reachable despite course or roadblocks. (Blackford advises against using the fam-

ily meeting area, which can be crowded and chaotic.) Write clear directions on the back of your bib so you can find your meeting place in your postrace state. And pick up a unique balloon for your support crew to carry. Even in a sea of spectators, a giant Tweety Bird will catch your eye. Finally, have a drop-dead time when, if you haven’t found each other, you agree to head back to the hotel or car.



**MISTAKE #10  
I FORGOT THE FUN**

Typically, I spend too much time obsessing over sock choice and gel flavor, panicking at the starting line, and neurotically checking my watch mile by mile. Fortunately, there always comes a time when the overachiever in me shuts up long enough for me to remember why I do these things. Suddenly, the cheers and cowbells seem louder, the sideline signs—“Go Mom,” “We Love You Dad”—more vivid, and the other runners like comrades rather than competitors.

At my last race, the grueling but spectacular Rim Rock Marathon in Fruita, Colorado, it took until mile 25, when my husband and two daughters pulled up, honking and screaming. My 13-year-old cross-country runner hopped out of the car and fell in beside me, instantly noticing my glassy eyes and stony face. As our footfalls fell in sync, she delivered a piece of advice no runner should forget.

“Look around at how awesome this is,” she said. “Remember, Mom, this is supposed to be fun.” **EW**