How To Survive The Last 6 Miles Of A Marathon

Unless you run several 26 mile training runs, there is really no fool-proof way to train your body & brain to perform optimally during the last 6 miles of your marathon- and even if you did, you'd probably be beat up on race day and take longer than if you'd followed a more traditional training plan! The best you can do to prepare is to make sure you do strength training, hill and speed work, back-to-back hard runs, progressively longer long runs (capping out at 18-21 miles), and tapering your weekly mileage during the last 2 weeks before the race… but how do you prepare for those last 6 miles?

The more marathons you run, the better you will become at negotiating the various challenges that can arise when you push beyond what you have actually trained for. There are some tried and true suggestions for how to maximize your final push: don't try anything new on race day, don't start out too fast (!!!), fuel and hydrate early, pay attention to your running form & posture, dress appropriately for the weather, etc. But what happens when you've done your best and things still start to fall apart? Here are some suggestions that I've either read about or learned on my own during the last 15 years and almost 50 marathons or ultras:

- Run with Constant Heart Rate or Perceived Effort: By running at a constant effort, you automatically optimize your performance when dealing with unknowns like hills, heat/cold, headwinds, being tired, feeling under the weather, getting tired or being in pain, etc. While your brain & body might be unfamiliar with the specific situation you are suddenly experiencing, they ARE trained to maintain your endurance effort for hours & hours of training you did earlier in the season!

- Cadence: If your watch measures cadence, USE IT! One of the first signs that you are getting tired and letting your form slip is that your cadence (steps per minute) will start to slow down. When you see this, pull your shoulders down and back, flatten your low back, and tighten up your core. Your body will recognize the increased efficiency and you will reduce your "wobble" that wastes energy and fatigues your auxiliary muscles.

- RELAX! Periodically scan your body and relax all non-essential muscles (shoulders, jaw, hands). Relax your mind, try to smile, say "Hi!" to other runners, try to breathe deeply but slowly through your nose, and occasionally take an extra deep breath with a slow exhale. When you are relaxed, your "lower brain" can better adjust your movement patterns to deal with fatigue, pain, and discomfort.

- Break the monotony! If you are getting tired and your form is starting to collapse due to fatigue (and maybe you're even starting to tighten up or cramp), change it up a bit! For a minute or two, try walking, running a bit faster (or slower), bring your knees up like you are juggling a soccer ball, run up and down the curb, run on the grass, or even try running with your toes in or out, make circles with your feet as the leave the ground, run sideways (or even backwards!) just long enough to shake things up a bit and give your "regular" running muscles a little break.

- Play some mental games: Tell yourself to toughen up (or stop yelling at yourself)! Think about a non-running challenge in your life (or start strategizing for your next marathon!). Muster up grit and determination (or let it go and meditate!). Don't listen to your brain… just do it!

And finally, realize you are learning and getting better at running marathons!

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