

Taking the next step

Training for “respectable” ultra-marathon times for a “middle of the packer” (or how running ultras can improve your marathon time).

by Andy Hayward (RRC 11915)

We always read so much about the top runners and hear about their training, those talented individuals who are coached and groomed to reach the top level of our sport. But what about the average individual or club runner who wants to test him or herself, to see just what they can accomplish if pushed? A lot of people who achieve “ordinary” results can be dissuaded from attempting to go to the next level, and never find out what their potential is. But if they realised what they could do if they tried, I think many more people would take that next step. As Dr George Sheehan, the American running philosopher said, “We are each an experiment of one”, and everyone has to find out their own potential, and what their limits are by trying out different strategies, tinkering and changing them where necessary, and seeing what works best for them. When training for one attempt to do a reasonable marathon, we don't have the leeway to change anything too much. We train from a book (or these days online) training programme, give it our all, and if it goes well it is good, and if it doesn't then at least we tried. Unless we go on from the first marathon, we don't have the luxury of changing things around, to see what works for us, be it in nutrition, training volume, training strategies, or race tactics. The good thing about training for ultras is that to get the best out of yourself, you have to do many long runs and races and therefore you have time to do just that - experiment with different strategies and change them to see the different results, before eventually applying the best of them in the target race. I'm not a coach, and I caution you that you won't find a lot of the following in formal training manuals, but this is what (and how it) worked for me.

In the Beginning....

I have never been a good runner, but I do really enjoy running. Always up for a challenge, I wanted to run a marathon (in the days when there were not many marathons around) just to see if I could, and finally inspired by the first London Marathon in 1981, I entered and trained for the second one in 1982. I had a blast, getting round with relative ease and actually enjoying the experience. I realised afterwards that I could do it fairly comfortably - I did that first one in 3:34 off of not too much training, and still felt I had plenty in the tank at the end, albeit distance, not speed! I entered several more over the ensuing years, but again never really trained that hard, so did not improve my time. Whilst I would have liked to have got under 3:30, I never thought that I would get anywhere near the three hour mark, so didn't bother with too much more training than I felt was necessary to get me round in reasonable comfort. Remember these were the days when there were not too many marathons around, and running a

marathon made you a lunatic in “normal” people's eyes, and not long after recording anything over three hours made you a “scrubber” in serious runner's eyes (i.e. if you could not break three hours you were not a serious runner, and should “scrub” the race rather than make the officials stand out in the elements for too long wasting time waiting for you!). So, I would typically train for three months, run a marathon, and do nothing for nine months, before repeating the whole process, just because I could! I did this five times, usually running 3:34 – 3:40, and of course eventually this was no longer a challenge – I knew I could get round a marathon fairly easily – so I stopped for many years, not running much at all during this period.

Inevitably after a while, being completely out of shape, overweight and almost forty, my thoughts returned to running. I wondered if I could do a marathon in any kind of “reasonable” time. I never once thought I would be able to break three hours, but I thought that I might break 3:30, and 3:15 may just be possible if I put in some harder training. So instead of doing minimal training just to get through a marathon, I decided that I would train for one over three months (Chicago 1996) and then do the race as usual, but then rather than stopping, continue the training and run the same marathon again a year later to see what improvement a reasonable period of training would bring (I had previously lived in Chicago and had running friends there). This seemed to work, and for the first time I broke the 3:30 mark on my seventh marathon in 1997 at age 40. For the first time in my life, I got the running bug, and I got hooked on it. I joined the RRC, joined up with a group of like minded runners near work that allowed me to run at lunchtimes, continued the training, and continued running marathons, finally getting my time down to 3:15. Again, thinking I had probably reached my limit speed wise and looking for the next challenge, I decided that I would like to try to run a race longer than a marathon, just to see if I could. Being by now quite involved with the RRC and hearing about the fabled London to Brighton 55 mile race, made me wonder what it would be like to eventually attempt to cover that distance in one go.

The Ultra Idea

I invested in the RRC Ultra Training books, and realised that in order to even attempt this distance I would need to get a lot of miles under the belt to build up the stamina. It is pretty difficult to find the time to run the necessary high mileage whilst working full time and also having a life outside of running. However, by sometimes doubling up - sneaking in a morning or evening run by running to or from work (instead of dead time

just sitting on a train) as well as one at lunchtime - I built up to a reasonable weekly mileage. That, along with increasing the distance and the frequency of some of the long runs was my plan. I peaked at 80 but averaged 50 - 60. Then I would try and run at least one or two long runs every other weekend, even if it meant running early in the morning or late at night to avoid impacting family engagements. Initially I didn't run more than twenty miles in training, but sometimes I would do back to back twenties at marathon pace on a Saturday and a Sunday, noting that I could do the same time on both days without suffering at all. I then realised that to run ultras, I would have to practice running slower and longer. I figured that if I was going to run 26 miles in training, I might as well get a medal for it so I replaced the 20's and started to find and enter organised marathons to run as training runs. This was tough at first, as my mindset has always been to run as hard as I can in every race, so it required an effort of will to run within myself and keep my eye on the bigger picture of the ultra. The only complication with this was when it was a smaller marathon, and it was obvious there was a chance of an age group award. Then the competitive instincts in me would often come out and force me into a faster pace than I had planned, but thankfully this never seemed to have an adverse impact on the ultras, and in fact the "tempo" effect of this at the end of a marathon may have even helped with the speed element over distance. The good thing about using races in this way rather than running very long on your own is that you don't have to worry about carrying a drink or hiding one on the course - you just use the facilities provided. You also get crowd support that you wouldn't otherwise get. The other thing that was difficult to get the head around was that you don't taper before, or rest after the marathon as you would normally, but rather you just build it in as a training run. However, if you are not pushing hard and are running well within yourself, this is not as tough as it sounds, once you get used to the idea. Other than that, the training was the same as I had been doing for the marathon - I just made the long training run longer - 26.2 miles instead of 20.

The Ultra Phase

In 1998 I plucked up the courage to take the next step, and tested myself out on a couple of shorter ultras, just to see if I could run further than 26.2 miles. I picked a couple of 35 mile races, as I figured that I knew I could go at least 26.2 miles fairly comfortably, and I could walk the last nine miles if I had to. This gave me a safety blanket/comfort level of being achievable even if too far to run all of it. I found that by slowing the pace a little so that I constantly felt I was running in my comfort zone, I breezed through the wall and out the other side, without even noticing it, and on to the end of the races. I then stepped out into the void of the London to Brighton - 20 miles further than I had ever run before. Standing on the start line level with Big Ben on the north side of Westminster Bridge, in the first light at 7am on a Sunday morning was truly scary.



Andy Hayward, who does get around!

The road ahead was 55 miles long, ending at the sea on the south coast! That seems a long journey in a car! But again by maintaining a comfortable pace, I finished without problem. I found that with this training and a sensible race strategy (i.e. run 30-45 seconds a mile slower than marathon race pace) I could keep going all the way, and the further the distance, the higher up the field percentage wise I usually finished because of good stamina training. Whilst I struggled to run many six minute miles together, I could eventually hold a 7:30 pace for 50+ miles. I finally realised that despite a lack of running speed talent, I did have plenty of stamina, and by developing this as much as possible I could achieve fairly reasonable times at longer distances. My running "talent" was the stamina, not the speed! I eventually ran London to Brighton three times, and 100 kilometres (62.1 miles) twice, as well as ten shorter ultras (31 - 35 miles). My best London to Brighton time was 7:08 in 2003 at age 46, finishing tenth overall, winning the SEAA (South of England Athletics Association) Ultra Championships Bronze Medal. I decided to try and see what my distance limit was, and never really found it. In 2004 I entered the RRC 100 kilometre championships, and then three months later the 100 kilometre World Championships in Windschoten, Netherlands. I was not one of the five picked for the GB team, but entered the open race on my own, and ended up second GB finisher, 89th of 400 finishers in a World Championships. This is not quite as grand as it sounds, as I was a long way behind the first GB finisher, and the other four who would all have been faster than me dropped out of the race. However, I feel it is still an achievement, and a testament that you can build up to that distance and still finish with a "respectable" time and placing despite being outside the top group.

How Ultra Training Can Improve Your Sub Ultra Times

I also found that training for and running ultras actually improved my times at shorter distances, up to and including the marathon, eventually achieving the holy grail of serious club marathon runners of breaking three hours (once, at Dallas TX USA in December 2001 at age 44, 2:57:31, having hit every minute between 3:06 and 3:01 before doing so). This was way ahead of my

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wildest dreams when I first started running. I often wondered if I should have raced more marathons to try and improve my marathon PB rather than using them as training runs and concentrating on ultras, but I know in my heart of hearts that it was doing the ultras that gave me the stamina to maintain the speed that I did have over the marathon distance. Ironically, I can only keep up with more naturally talented runners when I am doing high mileage.

The Training Plan

Knowing that much less than 1% of the population will ever run a marathon in their lives, it is nice in a way to realise that you are constantly marathon fit, and would be able to run one at the drop of a hat if you chose to. And that with the right training you could go on and actually become one of the infinitesimal number of people on the planet who will ever complete an ultra marathon. This therefore is a three month ultra marathon training plan based on typical marathon training plans, and actually starting from a marathon, but beefed up to take you from there to that first (shorter) ultra marathon. I've also included the last four weeks taking you up to, and including that marathon.

I have obviously assumed that this is not your first marathon so you have some idea of what works for you up to that distance, and that you are currently fully trained with a proper build up to get round a marathon without distress. If this is not the case, please do not attempt anything in this article! I have based it on a build up to 60 miles a week, and a three week 80%/60%/40% taper. However, if you have trained to a higher weekly mileage, or decide a two a week taper, or 75%/50%/25% works better for you, these would be changed to suit you. This marathon will now be even more comfortable than normal as it should be run at a pace well within your comfort level, and not pushed like a race. It is important to hold back, to teach the mind to think of the bigger picture and not the race you are currently running. You need the benefit of this longer slow run to come through in the following weeks, and should run 30 – 60 seconds per mile slower than you would if you were targeting the marathon as a race. You should finish easily, feeling you could go on. Unlike the normal feeling when you have raced a marathon that you couldn't run another step, you should feel like it was a long training run (which it was!). I would advise and have therefore assumed an initial target of a shorter ultra race, such as 50k or 35 miles before building to go further.

As far as the actual runs, the normal definitions of steady, easy, very easy, tempo etc. would apply. I tried to mix up fartlek and hills for variety, but really the point is to get some efforts in, and run out of your comfort zone. Fartlek and strides can be as tough or as easy as you feel on the day – just a few or a lot of shorter (or longer) efforts to increase the heart rate and leg turn over. For intervals, I mixed up the distances from 1k's to 1 and 2 miles. I found 6 – 8 x 1k reps built into a



6 - 8m run with either a couple of minute jog or rest, worked well. A lot of the books say these are too short to have any benefit for even marathon runners, but I found that just increasing your base speed on shorter runs flows through to allow you to run faster further more comfortably. The 10 mile interval sessions that gave me the most benefit were 1m warm up, 2m hard, 1m jog, 2m hard, 1m jog, 2m hard, 1m warm down. This is a hard run, and would not happen the same week as a long (20m) run. I tried to run the long (20m) runs at marathon race pace as running long slower than you expect to run a marathon as a race never worked for me. However, remembering the bigger picture again where it is necessary to run the ultra at a slower pace than a marathon race, I did the marathons that I used for long training runs at my expected ultra pace, or 30-45 seconds a mile below marathon race pace. This then made for a much quicker recovery in the legs, as it was just a long training run rather than a marathon race. The week before a marathon race or ultra I would often do a half marathon at an easy pace, but just blast the last mile to give my legs a good turn over. At least one half marathon flat out as a race is good for speed stamina, but again not the same week as a long run, or too close to the target race.

These sessions can be changed around to fit your schedule, or how you feel. For example Easy and Steady can be interchanged if you want to make the run slightly harder or more relaxed. I never had many complete rest days as I found that an easy run benefited me more than no run, but if you prefer to take a rest day every week, then move things around (or even reduce the overall weekly mileage) to accommodate this.

Regarding nutrition, I only ever used Powergel and the like, even on 100k races. They can get pretty sickly after a while, not to mention expensive (one every thirty minutes or so for eight or nine hours!) but easier to get quick carbohydrates into the system than solid foods, and easier to carry (Race Ready shorts from the USA are a great invention) than say bananas.

Finally

To conclude, I repeat what I said near the beginning of this article. I am not a coach, and I caution you that you won't find a lot of this in formal training manuals, but this is what worked for me – it may not for you. But I was prepared to do whatever it took to try and get the best possible results out of my limited ability, just to see what I could do. I therefore devised this plan based upon my own experiences, my own “experiment

of one” to possibly help those like me who are already marathon fit, are not elite, not even very good, but rather serious and solid club runners, who want to take that next step – take the next challenge. Those ordinary runners who are prepared to put in the hard work necessary to get the very best out of themselves to see what their limit is (if they ever find it) whilst recognising and accepting that they are doing this only for themselves, and are probably never going to break into the top level. Having accomplished this (say a 50k or 35 mile ultra) this plan can be modified, replacing a couple of the 26.2 mile runs/races with 31 – 35 mile runs/races to build up to 50+ mile ultras. Again, the basic training is the same – just the long runs longer and more frequent. Good luck!

Marathon to Ultramarathon

Week	1	2	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
Monday	3 VE	10 E	7 E	7 E	5 E	13 S	0	13 S	8 E	6 E	6 VE	8 E
Tuesday	6 VE	5 FL/H	8 FL/H	5 E/5 FL	7 FL/H	5 FL/H	10 E	5 E/5 FL	16 S	5 E/6 S	7 FL	7 VE
Wednesday	6 E	7 E	8 E	8 E	6 E	7 E	10 S	7 E	7 E	6 E	6 E	5 E
Thursday	7 S	7 I	10 I	10 S	5 E/8 E	7 I/7 E	7 I/7 E	7 I/7 E	7 S	5 E/8 I	4 S	5 E
Friday	8 E	6 E	7 E	6 E	10 E	6 E	6 E	6 E	10 E	5 E	6 E	4 E
Saturday	10 E	5 VE	10 E	3 VE	7 VE	5 VE	10 VE	10 VE	6 VE	10 VE	6 VE	3 VE
Sunday	10 S	20 MRP	10 MRP	26.2 UP	5 E/7 E	20 MRP	20 MRP	20 MRP	26.2 UP	13 T	13.1 VE*	Ultra
Total	50	60	60	70	60	70	70	80	80	64	48	(32+35)67

Previous Four Weeks

Week	-3	-2	-1	0
Monday	7 E	5 E	6 E	5 E
Tuesday	7 FL/H	6 S	7 FL/H	7 VE
Wednesday	6 E	10 E	6 E	5 E
Thursday	7 S	6 I	4 S	4 E
Friday	7 E	5 E	6 E	0
Saturday	6 E	10 VE	0	3 VE
Sunday	20 MRP	6 S	7 T	26.2 UP
Total	60	48	36	(24+26) 50

Legend

- VE Very Easy
- VE* Last mile hard
- E Easy/Steady
- T Tempo
- H Hills
- I Intervals
- FL Fartlek
- S Strides
- MRP Marathon Race Pace
- UP Ultra Pace

