The Marathon Aftermath

By Shelly Glover

You may not have given much thought to marathon recovery. After all, you trained, ran, finished and got your medal. With a wave of blessed relief, you realize the pressure is off. Now what?

Coping – The First Few Hours and Days

What's more painful than running a marathon? How about the fatigue and soreness of the hours and days afterwards? Expect it, its part of the deal. Marathon recovery goes backward. At first you'll feel worse instead of better. Whether you are bragging or licking your wounds, quicken recovery with our tips for rehydrating, refueling, and reducing soreness.

Keep Moving. When you finish the marathon, it's a hike to get your medal, a hike to get your blanket and a hike to the baggage and family reunion area. That's good. Moving prevents stiffness. A 15-to-20 minute walk is helpful. More is better if you can manage.

Drink and Eat. Refuel with carbs and fluid soon. Drink until your urine runs light yellow or clear. This takes a while. Of course how long depends on what you drink. A swig of beer can go straight through you and cause further dehydration. With beer your urine will be clear, but you'll still be dehydrated. At least you will think you feel better.

Ice. Contain swelling in painful areas by icing for 10minutes or so. Repeat along with ibuprofen for the next few hours and days to combat inflammation.

Stretch Lightly. Limber up, but don't overstretch fatigued muscles.

Closure. Go ahead, hang around after the race to celebrate. Share stories of the gory and glory. When you've gathered the strength, or friends to assist you head home for the shower. You'll feel better. The shower is optional for your friends. Some runners say a hot bath or whirlpool relaxes and loosens their muscles. Experts resist. They say heat increases inflammation and body temperature. They suggest instead cold showers or baths. No thanks. Not for me!

Stop and Shop. Take a nap. The day's caffeinated gels and excitement may keep you awake, but just resting a bit is a good idea. Later, go for another walk (15 to 30 minutes) and stretch lightly, or swim to combat stiffness and help you relax. My personal solution to movement and relaxation: go shopping! Every good effort deserves a reward!

The Morning After
Take a bath or warm shower to loosen up. Treat injuries first with ice. Walk and stretch gently. A professional massage speeds recovery. Schedule one 24 to 48 hours after the race and another a few days later.

The Next Few Days
Get plenty of sleep. At night, go to bed early. Other times take naps. Shuteye boosts immunity and heals the overexerted body. The first few nights after a marathon, runners often have trouble sleeping. If that includes you, at least lie in bed and rest often. On the other hand, if you are having trouble staying awake, don't worry. Your body deserves the extra downtime.

Refueling and Rehydrating
It takes three to five days to refill glycogen stores. Runners often don't go for carbohydrates hard enough after the marathon. Forgetting to munch with an eye on nutrition prolongs fatigue and delays a comfortable return to training.

Returning to Training – The Reverse Taper

Rebuilding. One predictable truth about runners is – if something works, they'll change it. Case in point, if a runner runs a strong marathon, the urge is to jump back into training with a little more mileage, a little faster, a little harder, or a little more of something. This is how success breeds failure. After your great marathon effort, don't be so anxious to start training your heart out and improve. Actually take a few easy runs to enjoy the scenery.

Hold Back. Even if you feel strong, you're only as strong as your weakest (or sorest) spot. Take one recovery day for every mile of your race. Um, for the math challenged that's about 26 days or roughly a month. Recovery rate depends on the runner and the marathon. It's usually easier to recover from a good marathon than a disappointing one.

Biopsies done on marathoners show muscle cells take up to a month to recover from the microscopic damage inflicted during a race. Besides recovering from soreness and blisters, you need time to ignite the desire to train.

Recovery deserves as much planning as your premarathon schedule. Think of it as the premarathon taper in reverse – a few off days, then a few short runs, then a gradual increase in weekly mileage until you reach your normal, pre-marathon peak level.

To Run or Not To Run?
Many veterans insist on running the next day, perhaps even the evening of the marathon. They believe it helps recovery. But a study by Dr. Costill at Ball State University in Indiana indicates you may be better off not even running a step for the first week. Researchers compared a group that didn't run for a week with a matched group that ran easily for 20 to 40 minutes a day. The nonrunners scored better in tests for muscle strength and endurance three days and a week after the marathon.

Why pound away on muscles that need time to repair? If you insist on working out, stick to 30 to 60 minutes of nonimpact aerobic exercise. Swimming is particularly good with its natural massaging action. Frequent walks help too.

First Few Return Runs
After a few days of nonrunning, try two to four miles per day or alternate days the rest of the week. Increase mileage the second week to no more than 25 to 50 percent of normal and to no more than 50 to 75 percent during the third and fourth post-marathon weeks (but less than this is okay). By the fourth or fifth week you may be ready to resume normal mileage. For example, this may be 40 miles a week compared to 50miles at peak marathon training.

Pace and Speed Work
Forget about for awhile. Run easy according to how you feel. First aim to run without soreness. Then gradually get back to your normal training pace. Hard runs aren't advisable for a month or so.

Ease into speedwork. If your body is ready and willing, about 10 to 14 days after the marathon try a light speed session. Controlled fartlek or a tempo run will help you ease into quicker running. Repeat this (or put it off) the next week, or try a few long intervals at 10K pace or slower. By the fourth or fifth week, you may be able to run harder speed sessions.

Anytime during your four-week "reverse taper" feel free to back off training. If you feel fatigued or sore, run less. Take plenty of extra rest days until you're back to normal. Don't run on an injury – damage is compounded in postmarathon legs. Remember, recovery is priority for at least 4 weeks after a marathon. There's no need to rush: Research shows you won't lose much, if any, fitness.

Depression and Rebound
Your emotional post-marathon experience depends some on your personality type, according to Maryellen Duane, Ph. D., clinical psychologist at Winning Lifestyles.

Duane knows what's she speaks. A 10-time marathoner, she's on the frontlines as head of the New York City Marathon Psyching Team.

Newbie's often have a different post experience than veteran marathoners, she explains. "For first-timers, finishing the marathon is a lifetime experience. They often

revel in feelings of accomplished and pride. Like having your first baby, there's nothing like your first marathon.

Rebound with your post marathon rush to tackle projects or lifestyle changes you've been trying to get up the nerve to do. You know, write the novel! Go get that new job! Start that internet site!

As per Lombardi-ism, "It is time for us all to cheer for the doer, the achiever – the one who recognizes the challenge and does something about it. "Thanks, Vince. The doer is you. The achiever is you. You proved it finishing the marathon. Now go recognize a new challenge and do something about it!

But alas – not all runners rebound from happy marathon experiences. Some runners must rebound from unhappy experiences.

Unhappy competitive marathoners tend to focus on a single negative aspect of the race (for example finishing time) instead of the overall positive experience. They miss the pleasure. Come on all you narcissists; we are talking about you. That should at least make you happy!

Even if you ran a good race, you may feel down for a few weeks. Allan Steinfeld, NYRP top honcho, at the AfterMarathon Clinic compared the let-down to postpartum depression. (Here we go with that baby simile again…) "Your 'baby' has reached the finish line and your long-sought-after goal, around which your life revolved for months, has been achieved, leaving you feeling empty, " he explains.

It's okay to cool serious running for awhile. Shoo away the blues by delving into stuff you had to give up while consumed by running. Duane suggests setting another challenge for yourself. "Enjoy your marathon accomplishment, and then focus on a non-running goal. Try yoga, or cross country skiing. Run in a new place. Do something novel to avoid staleness." Not only does this nurture a positive focus, but helps avoid injury too.

But, don't forget to run. Training during the winter months is a good investment in your future.

Recap

- Generally the first week after a marathon you run very little or a few miles here or there.
- The second week try running about 10 to 20 percent of your base mileage going into the marathon. Some 15 to 20miles for the week is usually more than enough.
- The third week after the marathon, it is ok to come back up to base mileage.
- The third or fourth week try a little light speed training such as modified fartlek or a tempo run.
- After four to six weeks competitive runners, depending on conditioning, may return to racing. Novice and casual marathoners may want to take a little more time and return to racing within five to eight weeks.

Race & Training Analysis

After weeks and months of training a runner races the NYC Marathon, gets a time and moves on. That's that, it's over, done, kaput, fine and the end. The course is run. You've been there and done that. Onward ho, you cry, to the next race!

Slow down. Hold on. Back up. The finish line clock isn't the only valuable feedback from a marathon. A backward glance helps direct and focus where you are going with training and racing goals. Most marathons aren't all good or all bad. While the event is vivid, mentally play back the episode. Take the time to set down what went right – and wrong into specifics.

The objectives of analysis are to:

1. Reinforce what you did well.
2. Learn from your mistakes.

Here's a key to looking for clues in your marathon performance:

Race Time

Record your splits. These are your times along the way (i.e. at 2miles, 10K, ½ marathon, 20miles) How was your pacing? How does your time compare to your goals, other marathons, predicted time, and training partners?

Weather

It makes a difference in how your run. Write down specifics for accuracy.

- Air Temperature
- Wind
- Rain
- Humidity
- Snow
- Sun Glare
- Heat
- Cloud Cover

Course Conditions
These variables can speed or slow your time.

- Hills
- Drainage slant or camber
- Mud and puddles
- Pavement conditions including fallen leaves, loose gravel, stones, oil
- Car and spectator inference
- Aid station bottlenecks
- Runner crowding conditions
- Crowd support

Marathon Goal Time
First-timers may have wanted to just finish. Others may have wanted to run the second half faster than the first. Still others may have wanted to beat another competitor or have enough energy to show off to the crowds on First Avenue. Mental Preparation. Record your motivational techniques. Maybe use a few from out list:

- Visualization
- Course memorization
- Progressive relaxation
- Themes such as songs or slogans to keep you sloggin' along
- Mental rehearsal

Race Strategy
Make notes on how you planned to run the course. Did they work? Eat and drink. Record what you did and if it was successful. If it gave you less than optimal results come up with an alternative for next time. Cover three areas of intake – before, during and after the marathon. Here are a few suggestions to trigger your memory.

- Breakfast
- Medications
- Sports foods and drinks
- Supplements
- Miscellaneous foods on the course

Shoes and Clothing

- What did you wear?
- Did the clothes rub or bind?
- Were they the right warmth for race conditions?
- Any ideas for improvement?
- Which socks worked out?

Aches and Pains
Notes what hurts when and where.

- Transitory aches
- Sharp pains
- Blisters

- Discomforts
- Cramps
- Where fatigue appeared first
- Trips, slips, dips and zips that can result in pulls, plunges and pains.
- Menstrual cycle status

Training Review

- How many total miles did you run in training?
- How long was the taper?
- How many long runs of 18 to 23miles did you complete?
- While marathon training, how many races did you run and what was their quality?

Summary

This is where you play sportscaster and recap the event. Make a few notes on each topic:

- Best parts of race
- Lessons learned
- Comments
- Goals for next marathon

Post-Marathon Cold

One in seven marathoners will get a cold during the first two weeks after the marathon. Yuck! That's a six times greater risk than controls who did not run a marathon. Maybe marathoning should come with a Surgeon General's warning, "Marathoning may be bad for your health." Yeah, well, before you start running away from running, look at it this way: six out of seven marathoners do not get colds after running a marathon. Now, which is the newsworthy headline?

The take home message here is that exercise at mild to moderate levels increases immunity. The intense level of marathon racing lowers immunity temporarily to upper-respiratory tract infections, e.g. colds. Young rookie marathoners are more at risk than veteran competitors. Stay healthy:

- Wash your hands frequently
- Get your rest
- Avoid unnecessary stress
- Eat properly
- Avoid that sneezing, coughing germ-incubating co-worker