Gazelle Sports

THE MARATHON TAPER…HOW TO ACHIEVE OPTIMAL PERFORMANCE

Why Taper?

- Training provides the long term improvements necessary to successfully complete a marathon.
- Training leaves athletes a bit tired most of the time.
- The 3-week cycles provide some reduction in fatigue, but it is not enough to completely eliminate it and allow your body full physiological recovery.
- The goal of tapering is to balance continued training and resting to allow for the best possible marathon experience.
- The International Journal of Sports Medicine examined over 50 scientific studies on tapering and concluded that there is no doubt tapering works.
- Studies have found improvements in performance of up to 16% with most studies showing 3 – 5% improvement. At a 5% improvement, that means a 3:30 marathon can become a 3:19 marathon through proper tapering.
- A single workout, on the other hand will give you less than a 1% improvement in performance!

How Long Should You Taper?

- Studies show for the marathon one should taper for a minimum of 2-weeks with 3 weeks being optimal. Too short a taper will leave one tired on race day while too long will lead to a loss in fitness.
- It is wise to err on the side of tapering too little rather than too much.
- NEVER try to make up for lost time due to injury, etc during the taper weeks. By this time any gains in fitness that will impact marathon performance have already been realized and attempting to make up for lost miles or workouts will just leave you fatigued at the starting line.

How Should You Reduce Training to Improve Marathon Performance?

- Evidence indicates that the key to effective tapering is to substantially reduce mileage while maintaining intensity.
- Reducing mileage reduces the accumulated fatigue
- High intensity effort maintains fitness level
- Exactly how much to reduce training mileage depends on your current training mileage, age and health. Older runners tend to need a longer taper than younger runners.
- Studies have shown as a general rule of thumb:
- 3rd Week Premarathon: Taper 20 – 25%

- 2nd Week Premarathon: Taper 40%
- Marathon Week (6 days before): Taper 60%.
- Three weeks before is the most important time for a successful taper. Marathoners often do too much this week because the marathon still seems a long way off.
- It is much better physiologically and psychologically to allow your body to start to rebound this week, or you will find yourself feeling flat the last two weeks.
- Often marathoners also decrease training efforts. This can result in a small loss in fitness as well as a lack of psychological reinforcement.
- It is more effective to intersperse harder efforts within the recovery trend.
- For example, the Gazelle schedule has 3 x 1-mile intervals the 2nd week pre-marathon.
- Marathon week itself is all easy recovery, with the exception of Tuesday or Wednesday where it is recommended you do a 6 – 7 mile run with 2 miles at marathon pace.
- This is a dress rehearsal, even wear the same shoes and clothes you will wear for the marathon!
- By this time, if you have tapered properly starting with the 3rd week, you should feel light on your feet, like you can fly…this will provide a great psychological boost!

Carbo-loading and Hydration During the Taper

- It is vitally important that your muscles and liver be stocked with glycogen at the starting line.
- Marathoners used to deplete glycogen stores for 3 days (sometimes even completing a long run up to 20-miles the week before), then carbo-load the 3 days prior to the marathon. This is no longer recommended since carbohydrate depletion can suppress the immune system (this is why many marathoners get a cold the week after a marathon – glycogen stores have been depleted) and the long run will leave you sore and tired.
- What works just as well is to eat a normal diet until the last 3 days and taper your training program.
- Then the last 3 days, eat a high carbohydrate diet and do a short, slow run these days.
- Your body will store glycogen to almost the same level as if you did the whole depletion and loading program.
- Also, make sure you are well-hydrated in the days leading up to the marathon so that you don't arrive at the starting line suffering from accumulated effects of dehydration.