

How To Choose An Optimal Race-Pace For Your Spring Marathon

Spring marathons generally pose a problem when it comes to choosing an optimal race-pace. Most runners have not maintained their peak condition over the winter months. So, they know they will need to back off their pace a bit; but, how much and what method can be used to select a suitable pace.

When a runner has been racing and doing quality performance enhancements there are several good prediction tools which can be utilized. E.g, For predicting the marathon time: $\text{Marathon time} = 4.65 \times 10k \text{ time}$. The WAVA% tables [See my “Using the WAVA Tables” <http://www.ridersite.org/SBTraining/WAVATables4.pdf> and the calculator <http://www.ridersite.org/SBTraining/WAVAcAl.php>] etc. Additionally, one can compare their current running economy[vVO2max], which is the fundament determinant for performance, with last fall’s value. See “vVO2max Measurement” <http://www.ridersite.org/SBTraining/VVO2maxMeasurement4.pdf>

Notice, that all these tools assume you are in an optimal racing state and have recent racing experience. This is rarely the case for ordinary runners who are running spring marathons.

There are two additional factors which must be taken into consideration, these are a bit subtle and esoteric.

[1] Your brain [Running scientists call it the Central Governor] remembers pace for intended distances very well. For example, your first few steps in a 10K race will automatically be about right for a 10K and similarly for a marathon. Unfortunately, our brains don’t do a good job of taking into account our current condition. Most runners run marathons at about 85% of their vVO2max. Thus, if it has declined over the winter, the marathon time will necessarily be slower, at the same perceived and actual effort level.

[2] If your maximum long runs have 20 miles, then your Central Governor will be programmed to stop you at about 20 miles. When you are in great racing shape and your running economy is optimal, you can generally override this limitation, the so-called 20mile “wall”.

So, what are some ways to deal with this situation? You can wing it; but, this has the risk that you’ll be forced to walk some. **Walking costs about 8min/mile; if you walk/jog 3 or 4 miles, you’ll loose 24minutes, plus.** Thus, your strategy should be based on minimizing the probably that you’ll be forced to walk.

Here are my suggestions for a race plan.

Select a pace based on:

- Your last year’s marathon
- One of the methods mentioned in paragraph two above.
- The safest and most conservative method, your average long, training run pace.

Your target pace should be **20 to 30 min/mile slower. Wow!** But relax. The plan calls for you to run at this pace for the **first 1/2**. Then take a careful assessment of how you are feeling. If you **not** laboring and feeling frisky, pick up the pace a bit and carry on. Continue to reassess and adjust your pace accordingly to the end. At anytime you find yourself “laboring”, back off the pace dramatically [even if it means jogging]. Do not attempt to “gut it out” Jogging is still faster than walking.

Before you get all concerned, consider this. The worse thing that can happen is that you’ll find yourself “laboring” at the mid point and thus have to maintain your 20-30 min/mi slow pace to the end. Worst case, you’ll “loose” about 8 to 13 minutes, **total**. Most likely, you’ll be able to pick up the pace for the final half and thus only loose about 4 to 7 minutes. This is a good tradeoff. The 6 minutes, or so, is good insurance you won’t have to walk some miles and loose about 8 minutes per mile.

IMPORTANT, test your selected pace. Run 10.0 miles at your plan pace on a flat, few turns course. If you can’t run it easily, then it’s obvious you won’t be able to run 2 1/2 times farther on race day. Reconsider your intended pace. Remember the rule: It’s better to run slower all the way and not risk walking.