How To Choose An Optimal Race-Pace For Your Spring Marathon and Half 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 peak marathon 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. For example, predict your marathon time with this formula: Marathon time = 4.67x10k, most recent time.

Also, consider using your WAVA%. See my "Using the WAVA Tables" WAVA Age-Graded Tables and the calculator WAVA% Calculator etc.

Or, one can compare their current running economy[vVO2max], which is the fundamental determinant for performance, with last fall's value. See: vVO2max Measurement

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 your previous 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 65% of their vVO2max. Thus, if their vVO2max has declined over the winter, the marathon time will necessarily be slower [actually, proportional], at the same perceived and actual effort level.

[2] "Hitting the wall", e.g. at mile 20, is simply due to the fact that you've been running too fast up to that point. If your maximum long runs have been 20 miles, then your Central Governor will be programmed to stop you at about 20 miles. Your fundamentals, e.g., glycogen stores, total number of running muscle cells, hydration-level, etc. are exhausted.

So, what is a good way 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 24...32 minutes, [12...16 for half marathon] plus. Thus, your strategy should be based on minimizing the probability that you'll be forced to walk.

Here is my recommended race plan. Select a pace based on:

- Your last year's marathon
- One of the methods mentioned in paragraph two above.
- Or simply, the safest and most conservative method is your average long, training run pace, e.g 20 miles

Your target pace should be 20 to 30 sec/mile slower [e.g., 8:20min/mi instead of 8:00min/mi], based on the method you used from above. …..Wow! …. But relax. The plan calls for you to run at this pace for the first 1/2 of the race. 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. Once you've exhausted your running fundamentals, you cannot run, only walk.

Before you get 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 sec/mi slower pace to the end. Worst case, you'll "loose" about 8 to 13 minutes, [4 to 7 minutes for the half marathon] total. Most likely, you'll be able to pick up the pace for the final half and thus only loose about 4 to 7 [1/2 this for the half marathon] 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 will not 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 having to walk.

Alan Rider.....

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