



Tip #12: TRAIN BY RESTING: THE HALF/FULL MARATHON TAPER

Why Taper?

Rest is as important to your training as your workouts. This is especially true for the taper period, or the three weeks (for the marathon) or two weeks (for the half marathon) before the big event! Training provides the long term improvements necessary to successfully complete a half or full marathon, but it also leaves athletes a tired most of the time. The 3-week cycles in the training schedules 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 full or half 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. 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. For the half marathon, 2- weeks is recommended as ideal. 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 much than not enough. 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 Half or Full 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 the below reduction for an optimal half or full marathon training taper are as follows:

Marathon

- 3rd Week Pre-marathon: Taper 20 – 25%
- 2nd Week Pre-marathon: Taper 40%
- Marathon Week (6 days before): Taper 60%.

Half Marathon

- 2nd Week Pre-Half Marathon: Taper 35-40%
- Half Marathon Week (6 days before): Taper 60-65%.

Three weeks before the marathon is the most important time for a successful taper (two weeks for the half marathon). Runners often do too much this week because the event 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 week or two. Often runners in their taper 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 **High Intensity** schedule has 3 x 1-mile intervals the 2nd week pre-marathon. Half/full Marathon week itself is all easy recovery, with the exception of Tuesday or Wednesday where it is recommended you do a 5 – 7 mile run with 2 miles at half or full 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 (2nd for half marathoners) 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. This is especially important for the marathon distance, although half marathoners can benefit as well. 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 half or full marathon so that you don't arrive at the starting line suffering from accumulated effects of dehydration.

What You May Experience

While many runners welcome the time of rest and decreased training during the taper period, for some it can be a challenging time both physiologically and psychologically. Physiologically, your body is repairing itself after months of hard training. It is not uncommon for runners to experience a variety of aches and pains as your body goes through this process. Rest assured this is normal during the taper. Many runners have a hard time psychologically during the taper as well. It is easy to feel like you should be doing more or to fear losing fitness. The taper is the final ingredient necessary for an enjoyable half or full marathon experience. Consider the taper to be part of your training and instead of heading out the door for the long run, dive into a good book, get some pending projects done around the house or spend more time with family. You will be glad you did when you cross the finish line of your half or full marathon!

Sources: Pfitzinger, P., and S. Douglas. 2001. *Advanced Marathonning*. Champaign, IL:Human Kinetics.

Pfitzinger, P., and S. Douglas. 1999. *Road Racing for Serious Runners*. Champaign, IL:Human Kinetics.