

How to Peak for Your Best Marathon Effort

By Sonja Friend-Uhl, ACSM & USATF Certified

Hello Runners!

I hope this finds all of you happy and healthy in the early stages of your marathon or half-marathon training. In the past few articles I discussed in detail how to periodize your training efforts for the best results on race day. The four phases: 1) Conditioning, 2) Efficiency, 3) Stamina and 4) Performance (or Championship) Phase are each designed to bring you to your best PEAK for your goal race. *(If you missed these articles please go to www.flrunning.com to research the back issues.)*

Peaking is what we will examine in this article so you can go into your race knowing you were prepared in every aspect of your training.

First of all I want to distinguish Peaking from Tapering. Although a good Peaking program will involve some Tapering, the two are often confused as the same practice when in fact they are different.

Peaking refers to the strategy and purpose of your entire training program...everything you have set in motion to lead you to a certain goal at your most fit and efficient point. Tapering is a process whereby you reduce volume and intensity to rest your body and make sure you are ready for race day. Most marathon training programs encourage a 3 week "Taper".

After continued research and my own coaching and racing trial and error I have found that it is much better to focus on Peaking vs. Tapering and that it is often too easy to get caught up in Taper that does more harm than good. Let me explain.

First there is the mental connotation of the word "Taper" itself. It signifies to relax, let go, ease off, etc. This is not really the state of mind you want to be in 2-3 weeks before what may be the biggest race or physical effort of your life to date! To many, Tapering means "The work is done"...this is not entirely the case. I have found it is much better for a runner to go into their race on a charged "upswing" vs. a relaxed mode that could lead to possibly feeling lethargic and sluggish come race day. Runners should be thinking "I feel so fit and strong I am going to run my best marathon yet!"

Now, just to be clear I am not suggesting that marathoners continue to maintain a normal training volume in the final three weeks. What I am suggesting is that too many marathoners taper way too much, reduce their training too drastically, and rather than bring their body to a peak, they fall into a mental and physical rut which they can't climb out of on marathon day.

A poorly planned Taper can leave you stale and when race day comes, you won't be able switch that "ON" button on again. I'm not suggesting that you shouldn't reduce your overall mileage, but what you need to do is switch your mindset from a training mode to a prepared, confident "racing mode".

I suggest performing some workouts faster than marathon pace in the final 10-12 days. An example would be running several short workouts at 5-K or 10-K pace which are

designed to bring the body to a physical peak. The goal here is to stay “sharp” and keep your fast twitch muscle fibers alive and ready!

Here are some highlights of a suggested, efficient “Taper” for those last 2 weeks:

***Reduce the long run miles and easy day volume. Instead of going 20 miles, two weekends out from your goal race, run 13-15 miles. The next weekend run 9-12 miles with five or six of those miles at your marathon goal pace.**

***Ten days out from your goal marathon race run 8 - 10 x 800m at a pace that is slightly faster than your goal pace (per mile). Take a 2:00 active rest after each 800m. Due to the adequate rest and the moderate speed, this workout will not drain you but rather give you a good boost for your race day pace goals.**

***Easy runs (and overall weekly volume) during the week should be reduced by 10% 2 weeks out and up to 25% the week before. (For example, instead of running your normal 45:00 for a daily easy run go only 30:00).**

The best way to describe an appropriate “Peak” is to maintain the intensity of your intervals and tempo runs via shorter, quick workouts while at the same time reducing overall mileage volume during the week and on your long runs.

Following a Peaking plan vs. a traditional “Taper” will keep your body and mind in racing shape. Rather than feeling lethargic and second-guessing yourself in the final weeks you will feel sharp and ready to run your best marathon ever!

Good Luck!