

Run a Faster Half Marathon by Starting Slower

Article Rating: NA

Submitted by: articlediner on 2005-10-05 and viewed 62 times.

Total Word Count: 1126

Author Rating:

Sample of Content:

How to improve your personal best time for the half marathon by simply changing your strategy at the starting gun

Content:

THE ISSUE

You see it at the start of every race. As soon as the starting gun goes off, the runners lined up at the front sprint away at blistering speeds everyone trying to avoid getting boxed up in the middle of the pack. And in the core of the pack, runners are pushing, shoving and maneuvering in a desperate effort to find some space and make their way forward.

Ironically, the majority of those runners lining up in front, just behind the professional invitation athletes, should never be there in the first place. Most of them are already huffing and puffing away after only 5km, all red faced and barely able to have a chat with their friends. Which leaves them with a long and manfully half marathon experience ahead.

What I would like to point out with this article is that if you have done sufficient distance training before your half marathon, you can improve your times, with less pain and quicker recovery, by having the right racing strategy. The principles I will be touching on can be applied to most distances, but I am basing my advice on personal experience, and the half marathon is my favourite distance.

THE FACTS

Starting your half marathon too fast can kill your chances of running a personal best even before you reached the 5km marker. As a beginner, I did that to myself many times. When I learned to pace myself better at the start of the race (thanks to the guidance of my running mentor), my times started to improve significantly. I also became aware of how many runners actually start their races too fast. This was clear from the huge number of runners I would run past on my way, from as early as the 5km marker, all the way through to the end.

The truth is, you can always make up time after a slow start, as long as you do it gradually. But start out too fast, and it's damage control all the way to the finish line. The lactic acid build-up is practically unavoidable. And it is only logic that you can't reverse the impact of the hard work on your muscles, which you will have to deal with for the rest of the race.

THE CAUSE

The biggest reason for starting out too fast, is the pre-race buildup and excitement. You're all excited, fired up and ready to go. The anticipation of waiting for the starting gun is no help at all. We are using the same starting technique for a 800m track race and a 21.1km road race, so it's understandable that we get a little over excited. However, the excitement is the reason that you start out running much faster than you feel you are running at that moment. My rule of thumb is that if I should feel like I'm running too slowly, I can always check my pace at the first distance marker, and rely on fact rather than emotion.

Bad pace judgment is another reason, and is often linked to the excitement problem. You might be trying to pace yourself, but your brain is sending the wrong messages to your legs, like "this pace feels way too slow, surely we should be running faster". Sometimes there is even a complete lack of pace judgment. If you are going to try for a personal best (PB), you should know what your target pace per km is for the race.

Positioning yourself too far up front in the starting line-up is another big mistake to make. If you are in a group of people that will run faster than what you are capable of, you will get swept along and start too fast. As mentioned earlier, most runners at the front of the pack start out at a pace that they will never be able to maintain, and unless you have a very good self discipline and pace judgment, you will do exactly the same if you find yourself among them.

THE SOLUTION

Experiment with moving yourself further down the pack in the starting line-up than you normally would. This is a good way to force yourself to a slower start if your self discipline is not good enough.

Compare the alternatives. Let's use an example and say you are trying to break 90 minutes for the half marathon. That gives you a target pace of 4:15 per km. Scenario #1 is that you are 45 seconds off pace after the first kilometer, too fast. In other words, you ran it in 3:30. Scenario #2 is that you ran it 45 seconds too slow, at 5:00. In this scenario you have 20km left to catch to the target pace, at 2.25 seconds per kilometer. This is easily achievable, if done gradually. Consider this in comparison to scenario #1. There is not much you can do to compensate for the quick start. Of course you can slow down, but that does not undo the damage of fatigue caused by running faster than you should have. If you had the choice, wouldn't you rather be in scenario #2? If you think these scenario's are too extreme, think again. I have done both of them myself when I just started running half marathons.

Find a partner to team up with for the first few kilometers. You can help each other to maintain the right pace for the start. My running coach and mentor usually had a group of up to 8 runners from our training group with him at the start. We would stick together and help each other keep a decent pace. After about 7km's the group would break up as runners perused their individual goals.

Practice makes perfect. If you are already hooked on the mentality that a fast start is a good start, its going to be tough to break the habit. A helpful tool is a stopwatch with enough memory to store lap times of each kilometer in your race. You can then analyze different races by comparing how you maintained your pace in slow start races, versus fast start races. Seeing it on paper can be very convincing.

FINAL THOUGHTS

Having a good starting strategy has helped me improve my times over the half marathon, and I really believe that lots of runners reap the same benefits, regardless of what level runner you are.

Remember: You don't make your race in the first 5 km's, but you can break it.

Waldo Pienaar is a former competitive runner, who competed in middle distance track racing at high school, and converted to road racing and cross-country while studying at the University of Stellenbosch, South Africa. A combination of injuries and his career as an accountant has since limited his running to a social level, but he still enjoys researching information on health and training.

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