

ALEX SHUMOVICH

RUNATIC YEAR

JANUARY 1



DECEMBER 31

Every day adds to the line.



“This book is not for champions.
It is for people who love
adventures.”

FROM “A NEW YEAR”

The whole book.

Free.

DIGITAL EDITION

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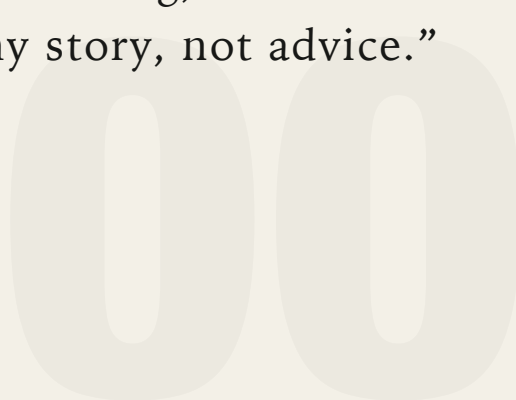
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WHERE IT ALL BEGAN



The beginning

“These are my own observations: what worked, what went wrong, and what I made of it all. This is my story, not advice.”



After a race, I posted a photo on Facebook, finisher's medal and all. I wrote that marathon training works if you read the instructions and follow them. My friend Dennis Clement left a comment: "What instructions?" I thought I'd write a quick post about building up your training and tapering before a race. Then I realized I should explain weekly mileage. And heart-rate zones, because those had helped me. A few words about cadence, too... I'd read books and stacks of articles, tried things out, and paid attention to what actually worked for me. So, at the end of the year, I decided to write it all down. Maybe someone would find it useful. The post got a little out of hand.

These are my own observations: what worked, what went wrong, and what I made of it all. This is my story, not advice. I have no idea how things will turn out for you. I just hope you enjoy the book and find your own reasons to enjoy running.

I called this book Runatic Year. Somewhere along the way, running stopped fitting neatly into the box marked "exercise." It crept into my habits, plans, travels, and conversations. Runner meets lunatic: a runatic. This book is about what happened next.

Spoiler alert: what happened to me

At 180 cm, I weighed 89 kg and couldn't run a kilometer without stopping. And let's just say I didn't smell great.

Then I took up running, and things improved. My weight dropped to 82 kg, I finished a marathon - 42.2 km - in just under four hours, and I was reasonably pleased with myself.

When I turned forty-five, I got more serious about running. Over that year I slimmed down to 72 kg, got my body fat down to 8% or less, and ran a marathon in three hours and twelve minutes.

Here's how it happened.

My first run

Years earlier, my friend Alex and I took a road trip across the United States. We rented a car and drove from the Atlantic to the Pacific: Washington, Miami, New Orleans, Colorado, Arizona, Las Vegas, and finally Los Angeles. Plenty of people dream about a trip like that. We actually went, and had the time of our lives. In the evenings we drank beer in local bars. In the mornings Alex went for a run, and then we spent the day on the road.

"Why do you run?" I asked. He said it showed him a whole different side of a city. Running lets you cover more ground than a tourist out for a stroll, and you see things you'd miss driving down the main roads. Early deliveries. People heading to work. Pedestrian streets, beaches, and parks, instead of just parking lots and big attractions. You see so much more.

That sounded convincing, so I ran my first 5K. We were near Lake Powell, in a hot, dusty desert, and it went terribly. Everything hurt. I was painfully slow and horribly out of breath. I quit immediately.

Back home, though, I bought a pair of Nikes - I just liked their advertising. Since I now owned the shoes, I downloaded Nike Run Club and gradually got into it. That's how I became a Nike runner.

For a while, nothing particularly interesting happened.

I ran occasionally. I managed a half marathon, then a marathon, then another. My times were nothing special.



January

“The simplest schedule imaginable.
Impossible to forget or mix up.”

01

The challenge: 365 days of running

One New Year's Eve, I saw an Instagram post by my friend Tony Vert. He was looking back on his year and saying how great it was to run every day. Now that was my kind of hero: a regular guy with a business and a family, not some mythical creature in a sports magazine. And he had managed to run every single day, no excuses. Hardcore! I wanted to do that too.

The next morning, on New Year's Day, I started my own challenge: 365 days of running. I hadn't thought it through. I read a post one evening and went for a run the next morning. I already had the shoes, after all.

I ran every day that year. Not every run was worth bragging about. I got sick a couple of times, and running with a fever was hardly comfortable, so some runs were just 300 to 600 meters. A technicality, obviously. But the streak remained intact.

Once, on a day-long trip, I spent my layover running back and forth outside the airport in Amsterdam. No running shoes, just heavy hiking boots. I was ridiculously slow. But the streak was still alive!

That September I ran a city marathon in under four hours. My legs hurt like hell. I could barely walk or climb stairs, so running the next day seemed almost unimaginable. For several days I covered tiny distances again. The important thing, to me, was that I kept going.

By December, I was wrung out. I'd had enough. I'd achieved everything I wanted to achieve that year, and now I was doing tiny runs, some barely worth the name, just to finish the challenge.

And I did. On December 31 I recorded a video about running for 365 days and being utterly exhausted. It got plenty of likes. Then I went to Instagram to thank Tony for motivating and inspiring me.

I found that original post. And that New Year's Eve, I finally read it all the way to the end.

It turned out he had SET A GOAL for the year: a mileage target to reach over those 365 days. Not a promise to run every day!

Tony had started his challenge with a "goal-setting kilometer" on New Year's Day. He'd thought things over, set himself a mileage goal for the year, and met it, but on far fewer than 365 running days. There had been colds, office parties, fatigue, and all the usual things nobody ever sees coming. Reasons, in other words. But he'd covered every kilometer he'd promised himself.

You should have seen my face.

On the other hand, I'm glad I never finished reading that post. I spent the whole year happily imagining I was following his example. Making an exception never felt like an option. Running every day soon became part of my routine. The next morning, on New Year's Day, it was genuinely hard not to go out. I had to make myself stay home. Imagine that: sometimes it takes willpower not to run.

Whatever else happened, that first challenge taught me something. I knew I could run every day. Literally.

A marathoner's watch

The following Christmas, my wife surprised me with a Garmin Forerunner. Nothing top-of-the-line, just a solid sports watch that could tell me all sorts of things about the wonders happening inside my magnificent body.

Unlike the Apple Watch I owned at the time, it didn't run out of battery by evening. It lasted three or four days, which meant I could sleep in it and track my sleep. That won me over.

I'd run with an Apple Watch before, but checking my heart rate on the move was awkward, so mostly I didn't bother. In hindsight, I wish I had.

Now I could track my heart rate, how well I recovered overnight, and my stress level. The watch also gave me detailed running stats. I was turning into my own favorite research project.

As soon as I put it on, I thought: right, perhaps I can run every day again.

I'd kept running during the year after that first challenge, but nowhere near as regularly. During the challenge, I'd covered 1,600 km. The following year I managed only 577 km over ninety runs. Ninety runs in an entire year! My results suffered too: my marathon time slipped from 3:56 to 4:12. It was a struggle. I pushed and pushed and still finished slower.

And, honestly, I missed running. Getting back to the 365 Challenge felt good. A big goal gave me something to get excited about. With the new watch, I decided to try another year of daily running. This time, perhaps, I'd know what I was doing.

Consistency

The biggest surprise was what running every day did for me. It's probably the part of this book people will argue with most.

Running articles constantly stress the need for breaks and recovery. There's no arguing with that. The body needs rest, and ignoring that

fact can damage your health. Even champions take rest days. Especially champions.

But we all have to play the hand we were dealt. I know myself. I'm a little lazy and not terribly organized. Give me a chance to skip a workout and I'll make a very convincing case for it. Could I move it to tomorrow? Take a little extra rest this week, or next? Get confused about the schedule? I can always find a reason to wriggle out of it.

When I was younger, I repeatedly tried getting up early to exercise, study a language, or work. I'd solemnly promise myself: tomorrow I'll wake up fresh and full of energy. I'll be the very picture of willpower. I'll lose weight, get flexible and strong, go for a run, do pull-ups, start the day in the park...

Then the alarm went off at six. My brain woke up and supplied some perfectly sensible objections. I had actually gone to bed quite late. Eight hours of sleep is good for you. I didn't need that workout so desperately; I was in decent shape already. I could exercise in the evening. Besides, Monday is a better day to start. I was like Phil Connors in *Groundhog Day*, waking up to the same morning and making the same bad choices. My version had fewer groundhogs and more snoozing.

Reason won. Willpower never stood a chance. Apparently I was far too rational to get out of bed.

I also know I'm exceptionally stubborn. In the 365 Challenge, missing one workout would mean failing the whole project. But there was no rule saying I had to run 10 km, get up early, or run fast. I could run slowly, briefly, at any time of day. The point was consistency.

My reasoning was that I could always find ten minutes, short of breaking a leg. In that stubborn frame of mind, even a broken arm

seemed more like a reason to slow down than to stop. I had already completed one year of daily running, so I believed I could do it again. Time had softened the unpleasant memories; all I remembered was the fun. And at a party I could casually drop, "I run every day." What a guy!

That was my solution to consistency: run every day. Not every day would make me proud, but if someone asked which days I ran, I'd have an easy answer. Every day. Pick any day of the year.

How simple is that schedule?

The simplest schedule imaginable. Impossible to forget or mix up.

It. Is. So. Simple.

Really.

The first month

Experienced runners really believe running is easy, almost the simplest, most accessible sport there is. All you need is a pair of shoes and some workout clothes, and off you go. Everyone has those! You don't need a gym full of weights, a coach, an ice rink, a golf course, a soccer field, or a volleyball court. You don't even need a partner, as you do in tennis. And it's free!

You can run alone in a park or along the streets, in any town, on any surface, at any time. Serious performance takes equipment, specialized shoes, and coaching, of course. But running for pleasure doesn't take any of that. Experienced runners believe this wholeheartedly. Put them on a lie detector and they would probably pass.

It sounds good. It's also not quite true.

Those runners have already started, and they love their sport. Most other people hate running because it gives them no pleasure whatsoever. Their muscles ache. They gasp for breath and get blisters. They're sweaty, smelly, humiliated by their pace, and appalled by their lack of stamina. Those cheerful experienced runners are intensely irritating. After a few episodes of suffering and humiliation, running gets crossed off the list until the next attempt.

That makes perfect sense too.

Running is hard work. That first run can be much tougher than your first workout with dumbbells. You're asking your body to do something unfamiliar, and it can't keep up yet. No wonder you're out of breath, sore, and not enjoying a second of it.

But I knew things could change. Enjoyment would come, along with the thrill of achieving something. For now, all I needed was consistency. No heroics. Just keep showing up.

Even with quite a bit of running behind me, getting back into a regular routine was hard. The difference was that I knew the discomfort was temporary. I expected those unpleasant feelings to pass. All of them.

I started with 2 or 3 km, often walking part of the way, at a thoroughly unimpressive average pace. My muscles hurt. From day one, the voice in my head whispered that this was a stupid idea. Surely I could run well without running daily? Surely I could take a little break?

I brushed those thoughts aside. I had known they would come, and I knew I could handle them. Little by little I settled into the habit and felt able to run farther and longer.

To coach or not to coach

A coach should help. My own track record hasn't been great, though. Whether I tried strength training or yoga, sessions with an instructor tended to lead fairly quickly to an injury and a long recovery. I'll admit that left me a little biased.

Perhaps I expected too much of a coach. It's easy to assume that if someone else sets the workout, they're responsible for how it goes. But it's still my body doing the work. I can't hand that part over. It's like trying to learn to drive by watching the instructor instead of taking the wheel.

Some of my friends work with coaches and love having someone to motivate them, answer questions, and set goals. Personally, I find myself arguing with the advice too often. I want to listen to my body, analyze my results, and read training articles, blogs, and books so I understand what I'm doing.

My friends usually work with their coaches online. For a modest fee, someone who knows running writes a training plan, tracks their progress through an app or Garmin Connect, and answers questions. When you have no one else to share your running troubles or triumphs with, your coach is there to listen and help. Besides, once you've promised your coach something, you don't want to let them down. You make the effort.

As a textbook introvert, I manage without one.

There are plenty of apps, and I prefer those, though I don't always obey them either. They provide a framework, which is enough for me. The same goes for yoga, gym workouts, nutrition, breathing exercises, and the rest. A framework is all I need.

A training plan

I had no coach, so no one was going to write my training plan. I didn't know how to write one myself, and saw no point in inventing a meaningless schedule. I'd probably fail to follow it anyway. Why pretend?

For the first month of my running year, I focused on showing up and logging my runs. I had no training plan, but I was building a habit, which wasn't a bad start. I could worry about pace, distance, results, and how each run felt later. First I had to get out the door.

People say you have to repeat something twenty-one times to make it a habit. Perhaps. It was a useful idea to believe in. Either way, if I kept doing it every day, a habit would eventually emerge.

Alongside the daily runs, I weighed myself and recorded the result every morning. That last part matters. I really did step on the scale every single morning. As with running, I had no carefully defined weight-loss target. I was simply keeping a record.

The difference between Monday and Tuesday was tiny, practically invisible. But the act of recording it created a habit and brought my weight into focus. I wasn't actively doing anything about it; I was paying attention. Writing it down. The weight did change. It just took a couple of months.

Apps

My main running app was NRC, Nike Run Club. It connected me to a huge running community, where I could find people I knew and compare our achievements in weekly and monthly friend rankings. My feed included people from Germany, the United States, Japan, Mexico, and Brazil. It was fun to finish an early run and find myself

in the lead. As runners in other time zones finished their workouts, they caught up or overtook me. Sometimes I was tempted to squeeze in an evening run just to hold my place.

I usually made the weekly or monthly top ten. During my running year, I was often first. Since I didn't know most of these people personally, I could add or remove them without much guilt. I chose a group whose weekly totals were close to mine. Someone impossibly far ahead is discouraging. Someone far behind lets you feel superior, but beating a much weaker runner does little for your progress. The best people to follow are runners you can catch if you put in the work.

The app offered challenges such as running 50 or 100 km by a certain date, as well as virtual charity runs. On one occasion Nike promised a donation based on the distance people ran on a particular day. Naturally, I tried to run farther.

I could create distance challenges of my own and choose audio-guided runs with well-known guests. I enjoyed it. Nike Run Club seemed to offer fewer statistics than Strava, adidas Running, Garmin, Under Armour, and some other apps. But it gave me enough, and the Nike community felt like mine. As the saying goes, "If it's not on Strava, it didn't happen." My legs have a different opinion.

I also liked the virtual Sunday 5K, Just Do It on Sunday, and the special running events. The app had training tips, plans, nutrition advice, and other encouraging little nudges.

There was a Nike feed for sharing running photos, complete with attractive Nike stickers. My own running diary.

After a run, I could see my route on a map and use the calendar to look back fondly at earlier runs: where I'd been and how far I'd gone. I could record treadmill runs too. I hadn't always trusted the distance estimates, but they'd become more reliable over time.

NRC also gave me achievement badges: little rewards for particular occasions or accomplishments. A New Year's run, my birthday, Lunar New Year, Valentine's Day, or Cinco de Mayo, for example.

I could earn badges for training three, five, or seven times a week, or for covering more than 50 or 100 km. NRC kept telling me how well I was doing. I have to admit, I liked it.

Running every day gave me a good shot at collecting the whole year's set.



February

“Sometimes I just want to put on my headphones and touch another world.”

02

Winter running

Winter running means learning to deal with snow, ice, and snowdrifts.

I have a pair of Reeboks that let me plow through snow without worrying about wet feet. I've also bought Salomons and Nike ACGs - All Conditions Gear. Those keep the water out too.

I like running in the morning. If it has snowed overnight, that means heading into the dark before the sidewalks have been cleared. You get used to it. It isn't as alarming as it sounds.

When the streets are covered in snow and ice, speed takes a back seat. That suits me. I slow down and save the fast running for better conditions.

Out in a frozen city, I feel stubbornly alive. I'm not a plant waiting for spring or a bear sleeping through winter. I get to choose what I do with the day. I don't need the sun to come out before I can enjoy it: I'm generating my own warmth, carrying a little patch of it through the snow. It's enough. I love that about us, our stubborn knack for finding pleasure in unlikely places. The cold puts it to the test. I'm glad to be out there.

Winter does make clothing important. I check the temperature and think about what will keep me comfortable. Thermal base layers under a tracksuit, a hat, and waterproof shoes are part of my gear. I wear Buff neck gaiters. In bitter cold, I pull one over my nose to soften the bite of the air. By the end of a run it has frozen into a wonderfully stiff shape. In humid weather my eyebrows and eyelashes turn white with frost. Great for photos.

Running brands approach winter clothing differently. Some sell outfits for specific temperatures; others sell layers that can be combined or worn separately. Nike takes the layering approach,

which I like. There are base layers, fleece midlayers, and vests ranging from lightweight shells to insulated ones. Depending on the temperature, I wear two, three, or four layers and feel quite comfortable.

My face tends to cope better than I expect. It's usually exposed when I'm outdoors anyway. My extremities, with less warm blood reaching them, get cold first. Two pairs of gloves aren't such a silly idea.

Winter running carries a real risk of slipping, falling, or twisting an ankle. I pay more attention to keeping my feet safe than to pace or performance. Even good shoes can slide. My main winter running goal is to come home uninjured.

Even great runners don't always train on perfect surfaces. Mud and rough ground make every step harder, testing coordination and building leg strength. I decided to look at snow the same way: a chance to practice on difficult terrain. When the ground cleared and I wanted to run fast, perhaps it would feel easier.

Winter, then, is the perfect season for running.

When to run

I read somewhere that it makes sense to train at the time of day when you'll race. That sounded logical. Most of my races start in the morning, and I prefer running before breakfast anyway.

I love empty streets and watching a city wake up. There are fewer cars and pedestrians, and I'm in nobody's way. I also start the day knowing I've already accomplished something. One less obligation hanging over me.

Summer heat makes running difficult. You lose more fluid, and heat illness becomes a concern. I haven't taken things that far, but in

summer I try to run as early as possible, before the sun starts working against me.

By evening I'm usually tired, so I keep evening sessions to a minimum. Otherwise I spend the day feeling that time is slipping away and I still owe myself a run. Running daily has become such a habit that the day feels unfinished until I've done it. Carrying that feeling around for hours is tiring in itself.

Many friends prefer an evening run to wind down after a busy day, followed by a shower, a favorite show, and bed. I understand the appeal. For some reason I usually run faster in the evening, too. Evening training has its advantages.

What matters most to me is that the run happens; morning, afternoon, or evening is a matter of taste. Then there are night races, which can be beautiful.

The treadmill

On the whole, I'd rather run on actual ground, pavement, or a track. Some runners call it the dreadmill. All that effort, and the view still won't change.

But there are exceptions. In winter, a gym treadmill saves you all those layers, the icy footing, and wondering whether the sidewalks have been cleared. It isn't a bad arrangement. Set a speed, put on some music, and get your run in.

The big advantage is having less to watch out for. No traffic lights, potholes, curbs, dogs, or scooters. You run at a more or less steady speed, with a display showing your distance and time. You know whether it says 2 km or 4 km, and you can stop whenever you want. No phone required.

If you planned to run 10 km but manage only five - it happens - you don't need a taxi home. You stop the machine and walk to the locker room.

A treadmill can't replace every aspect of outdoor running, but it does the job when the weather won't cooperate.

I particularly like being able to change the incline. Hills can be a serious challenge if you're used to running on the flat. Enter a hilly race without preparing for it, and you may slow down and tire sooner than expected. Adjusting the treadmill's incline lets me practice those climbs.

Music

Spend hours running and boredom occasionally creeps in. That's when I put on headphones and step into another world.

I listen to music and audiobooks. My Apple Music subscription gives me plenty of playlists, including the Nike Training series. I make my own too: Fast Run, Slow Run, Marathon List, and a few others.

Fast Run is for days when I want to feel unstoppable. The songs don't all have a fast beat. But when a favorite comes on, I feel I owe it a little extra effort. For three glorious minutes I'm Rocky Balboa. The traffic lights aren't cooperating with the montage, but my feet keep time and the kilometers roll by.

Slow Run is more relaxed. It doesn't urge me to go faster. It keeps me cheerful and unhurried, running with a smile. Perfect for a long outing at a low heart rate.

Then I discovered the charts for different countries and major cities. What a find! Many cities seemed to listen mostly to international hits, usually American or European, with little local music.

Fortunately, not all of them. I loved the charts from Bogotá, São Paulo, and Lima, along with Nairobi, Lagos, and Cape Town. Different rhythms, unexpected sounds: wonderful running fuel. If city charts aren't your thing, there are country charts too.

It's a little trip through sound. Pick a place you'd like to visit, or somewhere you've already been, and listen to what people there are playing. I rarely chose Germany, France, or Poland; the less familiar music drew me in. Anything was possible. I'd come home and tell my wife I'd been running to the music of Colombia, Paraguay, Kenya, or Japan. It changes the rhythm of an ordinary day. There's something wonderful about leaving familiar lyrics behind and hearing Swahili or Marathi instead.

I have a soft spot for the Kenyan charts. Some of the world's finest runners come from Kenya, so I like to imagine their music contributes something to their performances. Nairobi's songs have plenty of energy and terrific rhythms.

Botswana's chart stood out. I had read about this southern African country's relative stability, its avoidance of civil war after independence, and its economic progress. I was curious about what people there listened to.

Most country charts give you a jumble of tastes: melodic songs, high-energy tracks, rock, pop, techno. Botswana's chart struck me differently. It sounded as though one DJ with very particular tastes had assembled the whole thing. Tracks flowed into one another almost unnoticed. Obviously a whole country doesn't share one musical taste, but that playlist gave me the delightful impression that it did. I could have run to it for hours.

That's how I listen my way around the world. Whenever a song catches me, I add it to my own playlist.

Audiobooks

Dense business books don't work particularly well for me on a run. Part of my attention has to stay with the road, the cars, and the potholes. Complicated arguments are hard to follow; I miss too much. I mostly listened to stories about successful companies such as Netflix and Goldman Sachs. Nassim Nicholas Taleb's *The Black Swan* made it into the mix too.

Accessible popular science works beautifully. I listened to *Darwin Comes to Town*, about species adapting to urban life, evolving, and finding new niches. Ideal material for a city run.

I enjoyed *Guns, Germs, and Steel*, which explores why some societies, predominantly in Eurasia, came to colonize Africa, the Americas, and Australia rather than the other way around. I also listened to literary podcasts, history, and science fiction. Personal discoveries included Dan Simmons's *Hyperion* series and Jack London's *Martin Eden*. I worked through a whole shelf of surreal satire and was astonished by Liu Cixin's extraordinary science fiction. Even without any other achievement, those discoveries would have made running worthwhile.

Audiobooks don't usually make me run fast, but they suit a long, easy run. That's a good thing: I get an easy run and a whole new world to explore.

Before seeing *Dune*, I decided to listen to the audiobook. I was running a lot that week and finished just in time for my trip to the movies. Good call: without the book, much of the film would have baffled me. Running even improves my moviegoing.

Video

Yes, you can watch movies and TV while running. Not in the street, obviously.

At the gym, the treadmill tracks my speed and distance, so I don't need my phone to record the run.

I prop the phone on the little shelf in front of me, connect my headphones, and put something on Netflix. An 8 to 10 km run usually lasts about one episode. I can get my run in without falling behind on whatever everyone is watching.

The comb workout

I once read Haruki Murakami's *What I Talk About When I Talk About Running*. It isn't a training manual but an autobiographical book full of stories connected to running. Despite that, or perhaps because of it, the book has done a great deal to popularize recreational running. Murakami describes his pride in being someone who doesn't stop: he runs the whole distance, whatever it is. I associated that resolve with the Japanese runners I admired. Japan has produced remarkable athletes and records. Perhaps that determination to keep going is part of the story.

I'm not built that way. In a race I may run without stopping, but during training, why insist? When my body asks for a pause, I prefer to listen.

Garmin records pace throughout a run. You can look at averages per kilometer or mile, or at what happened minute by minute. Comparing workouts with friends, I noticed they often tried to maintain an even pace. Fine for them. Not always for me.

Often - not always, but often - I run in bursts. I go at a comfortable pace for as long as feels right. When my movements get sloppy or I run out of breath, I walk or stop. Once I've caught my breath, I run again. I keep doing that until I reach my distance target.

Garmin makes those starts and stops easy to see. My friends' graphs tend to show long stretches of running followed by a slowdown. Mine looks like a comb: a row of speed peaks separated by dips almost to zero.

That rhythm helps when I'm out of shape: I can finish the distance instead of giving up. If I've planned the breaks, taking them doesn't make me weak. I'm doing exactly what I came out to do.

I still get the benefit of exercise. The pauses let me cover more ground at a lower average heart rate while saving energy for the faster sections. My heart rate comes down, my breathing settles, and eventually I feel ready to go again. So I run again.

I love these combs. They're not formal intervals, where I force myself to cover a prescribed distance at a prescribed fast pace. They're short runs separated by short rests, helping me ease into running. I just happen to fit a lot of them into one workout.



March

Happiness

Matters of the heart

Lions and aerobic running

03

Happiness

At the end of a workout, your body suddenly feels relief after all that stress. And that relief feels like happiness.

I get a similar feeling in the mountains. As I climb higher, everything becomes harder. There's less and less oxygen, and my body seems to panic as it struggles to cope. Coming down reverses the process.

More oxygen, more relief: a kind of altitude euphoria.

Something similar happens after a workout. During hard exercise, your muscles burn through oxygen, your lungs work flat out to supply it, and your liver scrambles to clear lactic acid from the blood. Then, suddenly, it's over. Your heart rate settles, your muscles relax, and there's enough oxygen again. Euphoria. An oxygen-drunk kind of bliss. Endorphins enter the bloodstream, and your brain registers happiness. Never mind endorphins: studies suggest that exercise also releases endocannabinoids, substances your body produces to activate its own cannabinoid receptors. Yes, you read that right.

Runners get this regularly. You soon get used to it and start looking forward to your next dose of post-run happiness. Perhaps that's what keeps many recreational runners coming back. I won't pretend it doesn't matter to me. I get that happiness every day. No therapist required. Just running shoes.

Matters of the heart

Your heart never gets a day off. Twenty-four hours a day, decade after decade, it keeps going. We admire biceps and a well-shaped backside, but the muscle keeping us alive gets much less attention. We know it matters. We still take it for granted.

Running gives that muscle a workout. As with other muscles, I don't want to overwhelm it with too much work too soon. The idea is to build gradually, steadily, and consistently. I picture the result as an internal bodybuilder: strong and tireless.

The heart and blood vessels get the biggest health boost from running, with the greatest benefits coming from low-intensity training.

Some marathon and half-marathon organizers require an ECG and medical clearance before you race. That makes sense: they're trying to keep unprepared runners from taking on more than they can handle. So don't give the organizers a hard time over the paperwork.

I wanted a strong heart as well as a stronger body. I wouldn't see every improvement in the mirror. That didn't make it any less worthwhile.

Lions and aerobic running

Male and female lions live somewhat different lives.

A male has a mane and a heavy body, which make heat harder to tolerate. Much of his time is spent resting in the shade or moving at a stately pace. He's incredibly strong, but saves that strength for when he needs it: fighting rivals or helping bring down prey. He can run very fast, but not for very long. I think of him as a sprinter.

Lionesses are more active. Lighter and without manes, they cope more easily with the heat. They do much of the hunting and also care for their cubs. They spend more time moving and can keep at it for longer.

To me, this is a good way to picture the difference between aerobic and anaerobic running.

Aerobic means involving oxygen. At an aerobic effort, the body can supply and use oxygen to produce most of the energy needed for movement. The first explanations I read put much of this running somewhere around 120 to 160 beats per minute, although the actual boundaries depend on the runner.

For me, aerobic training meant a slightly elevated heart rate and an easy pace. It built general fitness and endurance. I could keep going for a long time, even if I wasn't moving particularly fast.

I thought of it as putting something aside for future fast runs. Kilometer by kilometer, I was building aerobic capacity and a reserve of endurance. Lioness running. Easy to remember.

Anaerobic running

A short burst of energy at top speed draws on anaerobic energy production: energy supplied without oxygen. Of course, you keep breathing, but the oxygen coming in can't cover the effort. For a while, your muscles draw on their stored reserves. You're spending that energy here and now, but you'll have to pay it back later. Spend now, recover later: that's the idea behind oxygen debt. You need to catch your breath, replenish those supplies, and rest. A long, hard effort can take days to recover from.

Anaerobic training, as I understood it, was about learning to sustain a demanding effort for longer.

Unfortunately, getting that anaerobic training effect means working very hard, at a high heart rate. These workouts are tough. At roughly 160 to 180 beats per minute, both aerobic and anaerobic processes are being trained; at higher rates, the anaerobic contribution grows.

Intervals and progression runs are ways I worked on that ability. More about those later. They matter because they help develop speed. And sooner or later, believe me, you start wanting speed.

Out running, I sometimes find myself beside a bicycle or an electric scooter, a bus or a streetcar, or even a motorboat moving along the river. They usually travel much faster than I do. Some have the unfair advantage of an engine. For a short stretch, though, I try to keep up, pull alongside, perhaps even pull ahead. I call it switching on lion mode: a brief burst at a pace I don't normally run.

There's an extraordinary thrill in passing a cyclist and staying ahead of the startled rider for a hundred or two hundred meters, sometimes longer. I love lion mode.

When the burst ends and I can't hold the pace anymore, I try not to stop completely. I keep jogging more slowly and see whether I can catch my breath while I keep moving.

Pain and suffering

At first I focused on just two things: showing up and avoiding injury. Don't rush. Don't chase speed, distance, or overnight results. Give your body time to get used to the work, and you can keep going without setbacks. The aches and misery will fade.

Then I could start thinking about how to structure my training.

Coaches talk about running at a low heart rate, and millions of runners do it. I decided to give it a try. Training harder than I could handle would hurt more than it helped. Did I want a useful workout I could enjoy, or did I just want to suffer? Easy choice.

Every running book seemed to say the same thing: don't rush. Such simple advice. So difficult to follow. I'll explain why.

Once I started running regularly, the apps showered me with records. Longest run! Fastest kilometer! Best 5K! Fastest mile! Best 10K! It felt as though everything was going wonderfully. Why stop? Why not join the race against yesterday's self and go a little faster? I had the energy.

But constantly chasing those records made ordinary training too intense. I was back to gasping, a racing pulse, and aching muscles, without a useful reason for it. Those feelings had been understandable when my out-of-shape body first had to work. Now, on an easy day, they were a sign that I had overdone it.

When I get behind the wheel, I sometimes ask myself: am I going to take risks today, or drive safely? The answer is always safely. I applied the same logic to running. I'd reserve the really hard efforts for particular occasions when I deliberately tried to run farther or faster than before: an important test or race I had prepared for. That was where the suffering belonged, if it came at all.

I made a deal with myself: ordinary training didn't have to hurt. That was how I got interested in low-heart-rate running.

Runcoins and heart-rate zones

Your heart rate responds to how much oxygen your body needs. During sleep, an ordinary person's heart might beat 50 to 70 times a minute. Run flat out and it works flat out too: 180 to 200 beats a minute, or more. Athletes may have different numbers, but these are rough ranges for ordinary people like me.

The number of heartbeats per minute is the heart rate, usually written as bpm.

Within that range, your body responds differently at different levels of effort. Those bands are heart-rate zones.

It took me a while to make sense of them. Eventually I came up with a money analogy. Money is a language most of us understand. Here goes.

Imagine a special running currency called runcoins. You can earn them, spend them, save them, or squander them. Much like ordinary money.

1. You're still living with your parents, or staying with Grandma. Someone feeds you, looks after you, and takes care of the everyday stuff. You rest and build up your strength. Money isn't much of a worry: if you need some, the family will give you a little spending money. You can read, meditate, and make plans, but you won't get very far with your grand ambitions yet. Or save much. That allowance is tiny.

This is the white recovery zone. Everything is calm. You're effectively resting, although you might be jogging very slowly. Pleasant enough, without doing much to develop your running. In this little story, you neither earn nor spend significant runcoins.

It's the stage before the harder aerobic work begins.

2. Now you leave home and begin supporting yourself. You get a job and start paying your own way. Your parents leave you a small emergency fund, so you have a little in reserve.

You don't have much experience or much money, but you don't need much either. You pick up odd jobs that cover coffee, movies, games, and a little fun. You live on fast food and candy, buying it and eating it right away. Tasty, convenient, easy. Life isn't especially stressful.

This is the blue heart-rate zone. Aerobic energy production is underway. Your body is using oxygen, and there's enough to go

around. Demand is still modest, so consumption is too. Readily available carbohydrate, stored as glycogen, supplies the energy. Nothing feels particularly hard.

Still, spend a little time here and let the economic machinery get going. You've crossed the aerobic threshold and started running.

You start saving a few runcoins and feeling more confident. You're getting the hang of earning them. Why not aim a little higher?

3. You find a steady job. There's noticeably more money, enough for more interesting things: a car, a place to live, a vacation. You work for it, but success makes you ambitious. You want more, you're getting more, and, best of all, your earnings still cover your needs. Plenty of runcoins flow in and out.

You also notice how much unnecessary stuff you own. Gradually you sell it. The clutter becomes extra runcoins. Your home changes, slowly but visibly, into a more spacious, comfortable place. That extra cash pays for a little fun and a few things worth having.

Your eating habits change too. Less fast food, more balanced meals. You realize you could save that chocolate bar for an emergency snack rather than eat it immediately. You start building a reserve, and the reserve grows.

Life feels good. You could happily stay here for a long time.

This is the green aerobic zone, where you build endurance. Your body is using plenty of oxygen, drawing energy from both carbohydrate and fat. As you use up fat reserves, you get leaner, build endurance, and look better. Good for your health, too. This is where I feel I'm making real progress. My favorite zone.

But I start wanting more. Now I want more speed.

4. You earn a respectable professional salary, but you also spend a lot. Eventually you reach a curious point where expenses exactly

match income. You occasionally use a credit card, but pay it off promptly. The little loans don't yet disturb the balance.

It's a fine balance, easier to imagine than to calculate down to the last cent. You're earning just enough to cover what you spend. Life is stressful, but you're keeping it together. Barely. Well done.

Congratulations! You've found your anaerobic threshold.

Your meals become erratic. You work too much to sit down regularly and eat properly. A balanced meal here, fast food there, emergency supplies whenever hunger catches you. Anything quick. There are still enough runcoins, but only just.

This is my yellow threshold zone, the narrowest band: a little below and a little above that balancing point. Another five or ten beats per minute can take me out of it in either direction.

In running terms, this is the zone for tempo work: holding your pace around the anaerobic threshold.

5. Your ambitions keep growing. You want the glamorous life: expensive purchases, grand projects, something to satisfy your ego.

It costs a fortune. You need more runcoins than you can earn. Even your whole salary, plus anything you earn on the side, won't cover it. You spend the savings accumulated in the green zone, then start borrowing. A little at first. Then more.

You spend everything you can get, until it runs out. In this analogy, everybody's runcoins run out eventually. The question is when. An experienced runner with something in reserve may have enough credit to reach the finish. An inexperienced runner can go bankrupt halfway through and hit the wall.

During this glorious spree, you eat and drink whatever you can reach. There's barely time to sell off the clutter, though you might

sell a few things for whatever you can get. Fast food, rich meals, random snacks: anything available. Too busy to shop, you raid the cupboards you stocked earlier. Chocolate bars, honey, everything.

Welcome to the red zone. Beyond the threshold, ordinary aerobic production can't keep pace with the demand. The aerobic machinery doesn't switch off; it keeps working. But I rely increasingly on additional anaerobic production to cover the gap.

You're breathing as deeply and quickly as you can. Your heart is hammering. Yet lactate keeps building up and the effort becomes harder to sustain. You're taking on an oxygen debt, one you'll have to repay by easing back into the yellow or green zone.

A good credit history helps. Work steadily beforehand, meet your obligations, and the bank may offer a bigger loan for longer. Spend your green-zone years slacking, and the credit line is smaller and shorter.

Keep spending like that and runcoin bankruptcy gets closer. What I want from training is more time before it arrives: the ability to keep pushing a little longer.

Still, running in the red zone is an important part of training. It builds your ability to tolerate that hard effort and the lactate accumulating alongside it: the debt in our analogy. Short, fast intervals and bursts of speed belong here. You won't get impressive results without learning to run hard. And learning takes practice.

Spend too much time in red, though, and you can wreck your credit rating - or your health. Getting back to a comfortable green may then require a long period of recovery.

Personal boundaries

Heart-rate boundaries are individual and can change with training. As an example, these were my own training zones at this point:

1. White, recovery: up to 125 bpm. Usually walking rather than running.
2. Blue, first aerobic zone: 126-151 bpm. Basic endurance.
3. Green, second aerobic zone: 152-159 bpm. Building endurance.
4. Yellow, threshold: 160-167 bpm. Tempo running and long intervals.
5. Red, high intensity: 168 bpm and above. Hard intervals, accelerations, and learning to sustain demanding efforts.

I could spend more than an hour in what my own zone system labeled red. Over time, I had built a good credit history and learned to afford those expensive runs.

Eventually I began to think I could tell, without a monitor, whether my pulse was rising or falling. I'd glance at the watch just to confirm my intuition. Naive. That feeling is deceptive and often lets me down. I still don't entirely trust it. I can feel wonderful while my heart rate has crept up, and I want to notice that in time.



April

“Making things complicated is easy. Making them simple is hard.”

04

Spring running

Every season has its pleasures and annoyances. In spring, puddles join the snow and ice, and waterproof shoes earn their keep.

Dressing for winter is simple: stay warm. Spring is trickier, and getting it wrong means freezing or overheating. A waterproof jacket often comes along for the ride.

The days get longer, though, and a morning run no longer automatically means darkness. I can head out earlier and earlier. More routes open up. In the park, I'm no longer confined to whichever paths someone has cleared. I spot the first birds and flowers, often before anyone else out walking seems to notice them. I like that.

Every spring I look forward to taking my "normal" shoes out of the closet, the ones for dry pavement and a decent pace. I miss them in winter. It's a pleasure to choose shoes for how they feel on a run without worrying about keeping my feet dry. Even that change makes me feel faster, lighter, better.

Spring and fall bring my favorite running temperatures. Around 10°C is often described as ideal: less work for the body to regulate its temperature, less sweating, the air helping carry heat away. The running season begins, and the first organized races offer a chance to test myself.

Spring is also a lovely time to start. There's time to feel fitter before beach season and enjoy the changes. If your running year begins in spring, good for you.

Spring is the perfect season for running.

Running, diets, and the weight-loss question

Making things complicated is easy. Making them simple is hard.

I'm not a nutritionist and can't explain every detail of weight loss. I'm keeping it simple: the biology we learned in school. Food and drink supply energy, measured in calories. Staying alive and moving around use energy. The body is a small biological reactor.

Take in more energy than you use and your body stores some of the extra, including as fat. Use more than you take in and it draws on those reserves. That's the stripped-down version.

Most diets concentrate on the intake side: different foods, different meal times, elaborate rules about fat, protein, and carbohydrate. Countless apps calculate calories and help you stick to the rules. My own rule is modest: I don't add sugar to coffee, tea, or food. If a prepared dish already contains sugar, fine. In any case, there are plenty of systems for restricting what goes in.

Those approaches have their place. Personally, I find counting what goes in pretty boring. I'm much more interested in the other half: how I spend energy.

Running burns a lot of energy. The more you run, the more you use, shifting the balance toward spending more than you take in. Keep that up consistently and you'll lose weight. It seems obvious!

So, pay attention: the secret to losing weight is simple. Run more than you eat. More regular running means faster weight loss. But build up gradually. Increase your running too sharply and you're asking for an injury.

Once I watched a stocky guy at the gym working very hard on his abs. He didn't look weak. His abs were probably fine, and so were his

other muscles. They were just hidden under years of second helpings. Watching him, I thought: three or four workouts a week won't burn all that off. Two or three months of daily 10 to 12 km runs, though? That would do it.

That's one reason I run every day. I also walk the dog. Keep moving that regularly and burning an extra 500, 800, or even 1,500 calories a day isn't difficult.

Garmin had an Insights section comparing my activity with that of other users. There must have been a lot of them: hundreds of thousands, perhaps millions. A couple of months into the year, I was astonished to find myself in the most active 1%, ahead of 99% of users across the age groups in steps and distance. Apparently I was using quite a lot of energy.

How much is "a lot"? What put me in that top 1%?

I averaged about 17,000 steps a day, often reached 25,000, and once hit 48,000. Across the year, my running averaged 6.5 km a day. Until I saw Garmin's comparison, that didn't strike me as extraordinary. That 99% figure stopped me short. If a daily total of roughly 13 km on foot was so unusual even in that group, how sedentary had we become?

An old Chinese saying compares movement to a door hinge: the door may age, but the hinge keeps moving and stays sound. The original hinges were wooden, yet the idea remains wonderfully simple. Keep moving.

Looking ahead, the really dramatic changes in my body came when I reached 80 km a week. I discovered that in June.

There are downsides. At passport control, someone always seems to point out that I don't look like my photo. Honestly, I don't mind.

The dry half marathon

After learning about heart-rate training, I decided to try a serious distance at a low heart rate: a half marathon. No organized race. Just me, running for myself.

I planned a route through the park and along the waterfront, left plenty of time in the day's schedule, got my head in the right place, and set off one spring morning.

The rule was absolute: stay below 145 bpm for the entire distance. Ideally, stay above 134 as well. But the ceiling mattered most.

I wasn't trying to go faster or farther. No surges, no bonus kilometers. One target only: keep my heart rate in that narrow band.

I already had enough experience to know I could cover the distance. I also knew roughly how long it normally took, where I tended to tire, and how I felt afterward. Previous half marathons had sometimes left me needing an hour's sleep. I'd be ravenous and thirsty, my legs trembling, my shirt wet enough to wring out.

This run felt unlike any of those. In fact, it felt downright strange.

I was a sports-car driver creeping through a city full of speed cameras. The engine growled: come on, we can go faster! But I'd made the rules, and now I had to follow them. Instead of touching the accelerator, I kept hitting the brakes.

Every few seconds I checked the heart-rate display. The moment I accelerated, my pulse responded. I slowed, walked, or stopped until it came down. In practice, I used 142 as the point to back off. Above that, I stood still for as long as necessary. So much for taking it easy. Slowing down took discipline.

It was almost comical, constantly restraining myself as though playing an odd little game. But I stuck to the plan. And for the first

time, a half marathon didn't leave me tired. I didn't even feel particularly thirsty - after 21 km! My shirt was almost dry.

My half-marathon best at the time was 1:50. How long did this one take? No idea. I'm not even going to look it up. More than two hours, certainly, but that wasn't the point.

What mattered was learning to run for a long time at a low heart rate. After that, I watched my heart rate like the tachometer in a car: too high and I needed to ease off; too low and I wasn't getting the workout I wanted. All I had to do was keep the needle in the right band. It felt like a video game. I could do that.

These are the workouts that do the most for your health and your running.

The surprising part was that a pace I once considered "very fast" gradually became an ordinary pace for an easy, low-heart-rate run.

Making sense of pace

Runners describe speed in a slightly unusual way. Instead of kilometers per hour or meters per second, we ask how many minutes it takes to cover one kilometer, or one mile. That's pace.

Running apps calculate it and show how it changes throughout a workout. I can compare sessions by distance and time, but also see the pace on each stretch. A pace of 6:00 per kilometer means six minutes for each kilometer: 10 km in an hour, or 10 km/h.

A four-hour marathon requires an average pace of about 5:41 per kilometer. Three hours requires about 4:16.

Unless I'm on a treadmill, my pace rarely stays perfectly steady. I speed up and slow down, leaving a jagged line in the app. Those

teeth in the graph are why I call my favorite workouts combs. I love studying them.

Some well-trained runners can hold an extraordinarily steady pace. At big races they serve as pacers, guiding you toward a particular finish time. Stay with them and you know you're on track. Saints, every one of them.

Volume

By this stage of my running year I'd settled into a routine, gotten used to the workload, and learned to run at a low heart rate.

What next?

Time to talk about training volume: the distance covered over a period. Weekly and monthly totals are the figures I pay most attention to.

A single run of 5, 10, or 25 km may feel impressive. But one workout doesn't tell you much. Look at the bigger picture.

Once I began running at a low heart rate, I stopped feeling so exhausted. I started enjoying running. Distances that had seemed excessive became manageable, and I could start thinking about a sensible monthly total.

With my previous experience, 100 to 120 km a month was familiar territory: about 25 to 30 km a week.

That's a modest training volume, but without ambitious racing goals, it may be enough. It's a base for a respectable half marathon in under two hours. Keep it up for eight or nine months and a marathon in roughly four to four and a half hours should be within reach.

If I wanted to race faster, the next step seemed obvious: gradually run more and see how much I could handle. People differ, and so do their responses, but that was my plan.

In the fourth month I felt ready to increase the load and ran more than 170 km. The following month I passed 200. The weekly totals I watched were now around 40 to 50 km.

Increasing volume made sense, but the rate had to suit me. I thought in terms of gradual monthly increases, roughly 10 to 15%, rather than sudden leaps.

As my monthly total moved into the 150 to 200 km range, I began feeling capable of more and wanting to enter a race. That gave me a goal. For me, it's what turns exercise into sport: something specific to work toward.

May was coming, along with the big races. The goal was getting closer.



May

Altitude and running
The thrills of VO2max
The carousel

05

Altitude and running

Running introduced me to a health and fitness measure I had never heard of: VO2max.

My Garmin tracked all sorts of things. Heart rate showed up immediately, while other numbers appeared only after the watch had gathered enough data. One day the app announced a VO2max of 48. Was that good or bad? I had no idea. A month of daily runs later, it read 52. Up seemed good, but I decided to find out what the number actually meant. I felt like Alice in Wonderland: every answer led to something stranger, and my watch seemed to know the rules better than I did.

The more I read, the more interested I got. Some of it connected with things I already knew.

Go above 3,000 meters in the mountains and you may encounter altitude sickness. The air is thin: less oxygen reaches your blood with each breath. You breathe faster and still can't get enough. Headaches, vomiting, dizziness, disorientation. The strain goes beyond breathing. Your blood and circulation have to adapt, too, with changes in red blood cells and hemoglobin affecting how oxygen reaches the rest of the body. Given time, your body adjusts to the new conditions and copes better with the shortage. It also remembers the experience: a second or third mountain trip can feel easier than the first, with a quicker, less painful adjustment. That's why you climb in stages. Reach a new altitude, sleep there, and let your body adjust. Then climb again, and spend another night.

The higher you go, the harder it gets. Around Everest Base Camp, at roughly 5,340 meters, the available oxygen pressure is about half what it is at sea level. Keep climbing and it keeps dropping. At extreme elevations, supplemental oxygen can make an enormous difference. A few steps, then more breathing.

Not every climber uses it. Some carry cylinders; others manage without. I read about the American mountaineer Ed Viesturs, who climbed all fourteen 8,000-meter peaks without supplemental oxygen. The skill and nerve were impressive enough. Having a body that could cope without extra oxygen must have made him the envy of plenty of climbers.

People who live high in the mountains, including Tibetans and Nepalese Sherpas, have genetic adaptations to those conditions. Their breathing and blood respond differently to altitude, and they grow up living with less available oxygen. That's why Sherpa porters can work for so long without oxygen cylinders and still feel reasonably well.

So our ability to cope with limited oxygen depends a great deal on our genes. Like many other abilities, it can be trained. But each of us has a ceiling we were born with.

In running, VO₂max describes the maximum rate at which the body can use oxygen. It's one part of endurance potential, and partly a genetic lottery. Yet training can help us develop the capacity we have.

The name breaks down neatly: V for volume, O₂ for oxygen, and max for maximum. VO₂max is the maximum volume of oxygen your body can use in a given time.

The thrills of VO₂max

Here's a little more detail. Relative VO₂max is measured in milliliters of oxygen per kilogram of body weight per minute: ml/kg/min. It describes the maximum rate of oxygen use during intense exercise. Watching it rise can be one way to follow improvements in fitness.

Beginners often start from a relatively low level, so early training can bring a noticeable increase. Progress eventually slows. Then you hit a plateau, and even a small improvement can take a lot of work and more focused training.

A laboratory exercise test is the most reliable way to measure it. A sports watch estimates it. The estimate is less precise, but I can still follow the trend: up, down, or steady.

My watch's estimate rose from 48 to 59 in the first six months. As I increased the load during the second half of the year, it fluctuated between about 56 and 58. Hard, fast runs often sent it down; easing off brought it back. That seemed to be where I had leveled off.

Experienced, gifted athletes may reach the sixties or seventies, with some elite competitors above eighty. I read of exceptional individuals recording figures of 84 and even 96 ml/kg/min.

Running more, especially at an easy pace, helped the estimate rise, up to a point. Intervals, proper rest, sleep, and nutrition mattered too. A falling number made me wonder whether I was training too hard or recovering too little. Since the figure is expressed per kilogram, changes in body weight affect it too.

I wanted to know how to improve VO2max beyond the usual advice to train and rest. One option is Billat 30-30, named after physiologist Véronique Billat: thirty seconds of fast running, then thirty seconds of easy jogging, repeated in a series.

Still, relax. It's only an indirect measure. Compare different athletes' VO2max scores and you won't know who's fastest or who has the most endurance. Only a race shows how people use their potential. Elite athletes improve their results without changing VO2max. Your colleague who smokes might have the genes for a VO2max of 90 and still fail to run a couple of kilometers. In another life, they might have been a champion.

The carousel

On a long run, thoughts go round and round. We talk about racking up miles, and sometimes we're literally running in circles. Wheels turning, a potter at work, runners circling a track: there's something mesmerizing about going round and round.

I found a mental trick for long distances. I imagine a vast carousel rotating beneath me, carrying me along. Running is simply how I stay aboard. Instead of hauling myself through space, I'm being carried by something larger. The thought is calming. Some turns of the carousel even feel easier than others. My seventh, eleventh, and seventeenth kilometers often feel easier. Knowing that, I look forward to them.

Sometimes that carousel pops into my head on its own. Sometimes I picture it before I start. I tell myself the seventh turn will be easier, and somehow the seventh kilometer brings a little burst of energy.

A ride on an imaginary running carousel is worth trying at least once.

Cadence

The cheetah is the fastest land predator. Over a short distance, it can outrun anything else on land.

An experiment comparing cheetahs with racing greyhounds found that the cheetahs could speed up by increasing their stride frequency. Greyhounds relied more on lengthening their stride, and couldn't match the cheetahs for speed. Something for a runner to think about.

The number of steps per minute is cadence: how often a runner's feet touch the ground. That little word held a clue to speed.

I knew about cadence already, but hadn't taken it seriously enough. After reading about cheetahs, I checked my data. On my best runs it sat remarkably close to 163, with a step length of 130 to 135 cm. Nothing unusual for a recreational runner. On slower runs the cadence was lower, on faster ones higher. There was the clue.

Running speed can be reduced to a simple relationship:

Speed = average step length $\times$ average step frequency.

To go faster, I could lengthen my steps, take more of them per minute, or do both.

Unfortunately, my usual response to wanting more speed was to reach farther with each step. A common mistake. What works in sprinting doesn't necessarily suit a marathon. I picked up several minor hamstring strains without gaining much overall speed.

Many coaches cite 180 steps per minute as an ideal. At the 1984 Olympics, coach Jack Daniels - memorable name, very famous coach - observed forty-six distance runners and found only one with a cadence slightly below 180. The others were above it. Recreational runners often turn their legs over more slowly.

Bodies and circumstances differ, of course. Still, that nice round number, 180, became a kind of gold standard for runners.

Working on cadence is slow, dull work. It can look pretty funny, too. One moment I was running like a normal person, reasonably graceful if not particularly fast. The next I was shuffling along, feet a blur of tiny steps.

If I had no interest in speed, I might have left it alone. But I wanted to experiment, so I tried running to a fixed rhythm above 170 steps per minute. A metronome app clicks away, and I match each footfall to a click. Shorter steps, quicker turnover.

Your app or watch probably measures cadence. Take a look. Somewhere around 130 to 160? Then jumping straight to 180 steps a minute probably isn't going to happen. Work up to it in stages. Start with about a 5% increase and get comfortable at that rhythm. As you improve, try a little more, then a little more again, until you find your own limit.

Why bother? I wanted to waste less energy with each step so I could hold my pace longer.

Running with a metronome

A metronome isn't music. It's repetitive and boring. I doubt anyone falls head over heels for this workout.

A few sessions, though, can plant the rhythm in your head. Your feet start to remember it, too.

I set the tempo and a timer, then tried to make each step land on the beat. I set it a little faster than my cadence on my best runs.

I won't forget that sound. The metronome chirped like a mechanical cicada, completely indifferent to how fast I was going. Somehow I was running much faster.

Long afterward, that mechanical insect was still ticking away in my skull.

To escape the clicks, I could use music sorted by tempo: 160 or 170 bpm, for instance, on Apple Music or another service. I doubt many people play those mixes at dinner, but they do the job. If all I want is a beat to follow, though, I'll take the metronome.

I don't have to use a target cadence throughout every run. I can choose one stretch for deliberate practice and spend the rest running at a comfortable natural rhythm.

I have no idea what Kipchoge listens to. In my imagination, though, it's a metronome.

The extra mile

In business, going the extra mile means giving more than promised: three designs instead of two, an unexpected cookie with the coffee, a job delivered sooner or better than the customer imagined. Doing a little more feels good on both sides. In running, you can take the expression literally. I set out to run 10 km, feel surprisingly good, and add another 500 meters, perhaps a kilometer, perhaps a whole extra mile - about 1.6 km. I've surprised myself. It doesn't always have to be spontaneous. It might be a modest weekly target of 50 km instead of 48, something I doubted I could manage and then did.

The distance isn't really the point. The extra effort is. Can I do more than I expected, or am I just checking a box? Can I surprise myself, stop putting things off, and go a little farther?

That feeling of getting past my own resistance is a wonderful reward. From time to time, I give myself an extra mile. A little treat. A little surprise.



June

Summer running
The weekly total
Different kinds of training

06

Summer running

Summer is my favorite season for running. What better time to build up the distance? Vacations give me new places to explore on foot. Every route is open, and I can dream up as many as I like.

Daylight arrives early. I run through empty, sunlit streets and along deserted waterfronts, feeling that the city belongs to me. If the forecast promises 30°C, six in the morning is when I want to be out. Miss that cool air and I'm stuck running in the heat.

Heat is a serious test. More than once I have literally wrung out my shirt after a run. I rarely carry a water bottle in my hand, but some days call for it. Daytime running also means sunglasses and a cap. I have to watch the heat and stay on top of my fluids.

Summer runs can leave quite a tan, especially along the sea with my shirt off. Conveniently, an out-and-back route gives each side equal exposure. Sunscreen matters, particularly if I'll be out for a couple of hours.

There are organized summer races too. On those, I find myself hunting for shade and choosing the shaded side of the street for a little relief.

Summer is the perfect season for running.

The weekly total

Running apps provide endless statistics. One of the simplest and most useful is distance. There's today's workout, this week's total, the month, the year, or just about any time frame I want.

At first I watched only the monthly number. If I reached 100 to 150 km, I thought I was doing fine. NRC shows the month by default.

Before this year, I'd only topped 200 km in a month a few times. I remembered how much work it took and wasn't in a hurry to do it again.

Then I read an article suggesting 80 km a week as preparation for a strong marathon. My 120 to 150 km a month amounted to only about 30 to 40 km a week, roughly half that. Apparently there was more work to do.

Six months into the year, I decided to try reaching 80 km in a week.

Running every day makes the arithmetic simple: a little over 11 km each day gives roughly 77 to 80 km. After six months of consistent training, 11 km no longer frightened me. A little over an hour a day, without turning my schedule upside down.

Fewer running days mean longer runs. Five sessions would require 16 km each. That felt harder.

I began running about 11 km a day and reached the weekly target on my first attempt. But I'd put in six months of daily training to get there, some easy and some difficult. It wasn't a lucky accident. The increase felt manageable, another step toward my goal.

For me, though, 80 km was a magic number. My running changed, and my body visibly changed with it.

Life beyond eighty

Eighty kilometers a week is a lot of running. Your body has to adapt, and it will. Keep that up for a couple of months and you can feel like a different person.

Strangely enough, my body odor changed once I was running more than 80 km a week. I put it down to the toxins that build up in any city dweller's body: I imagined my runs flushing them out faster than

they could accumulate again, with one workout following another. I'd sped up my metabolism, and it felt as though my body was cleaning itself out faster too.

After 5 or 10 km, I sometimes felt no thirstier than after an ordinary hour-long conversation. I knew I had lost fluid and needed to replace it, but I drank because I knew I needed to, not because my body was begging for water.

I had already lost considerable weight. Beyond 80 km a week, I noticed less fat beneath the skin and more visible veins in my arms, legs, and calves.

I could barely believe the mirror. It felt as though someone had issued me a new body. Eighty kilometers changed everything.

After keeping that up for two months, I entered a marathon in Riverton, scheduled for the end of August.

Different kinds of training

Running the same route, over the same terrain, at the same speed can eventually become a rut. The body gets used to it, progress slows, and boredom follows. I needed variety.

Different routes and distances. Flat ground and hills. Uphill and downhill. Faster and slower. I needed no elaborate system to start making my body work in different ways.

Sometimes I wanted more than variety. I wanted a workout with a purpose. So I started learning about the different types of runs. Each deserves a chapter of its own. Here's the short version.

Long runs

As the name suggests, this is simply a longer run, with the distance built up gradually. Most of the advice I read warned against training runs beyond about 35 km: a full marathon is more like a major test than an ordinary workout. Occasional long runs of 25 to 30 km were enough for what I wanted to do. I ran them more slowly than my shorter workouts.

To help avoid injury, start these runs with an easy warm-up and finish with a cooldown. Let your muscles relax and your heart rate settle gradually. The purpose is obvious: building endurance.

Speed intervals

These sessions alternate short bursts of fast running with easy recovery jogs. Start with five to fifteen minutes of easy running at a low heart rate. Then run hard for a short interval before jogging to recover your breathing and heart rate. And repeat.

For example: two minutes hard, one or two minutes easy, then another two minutes hard and another one or two minutes of easy jogging. Keep moving throughout. Repeat five, seven, or ten times, depending on your plan and how you feel.

It's hard work, aimed at improving speed and your ability to sustain high-intensity efforts. No more than once a week.

Tempo runs

A tempo run is shorter than a long run. You choose a target pace and hold it for a sustained stretch. Part of the workout is easy; part is fast. With intervals, you run a short, hard effort and recover straight

afterward. Here, you keep that faster pace going without a break. Only then do you ease off, recover, and finish with a cooldown.

On a 7 km run, for example, I might take the first and last kilometer slowly and run the middle five at my target pace. On a 15 km run, I might warm up, run 2 km at my usual pace, 3 km faster, another 2 km at my usual pace, another 3 km faster, then settle back into a steady pace to finish.

The aim was to develop speed and endurance together, getting better at sustaining a demanding effort as lactate production increased.

Progression runs

The classic idea is to run steadily for thirty or forty minutes, perhaps an hour, and only then speed up. I wanted my body to learn that it could accelerate even when it was already tired. Tired muscles still had another gear.

For a beginner, the same idea could start on a much smaller scale: a third kilometer faster than the first two. The point is to be a little tired and then accelerate. My natural tendency had been the reverse: begin enthusiastically, tire, and slow. Progression runs challenged that habit.

As you get fitter, you can run longer and farther before that tiredness sets in. Realizing that feels good.

I found it helpful to choose a route that climbed during the first part, naturally holding my pace down, then descended toward the end so I could speed up. I liked the idea of teaching my body to find some speed even when tired.

Fartlek

Fartlek means "speed play" in Swedish. Developed in Sweden before the Second World War, it alternates easier and harder efforts, preparing the runner for changing demands.

It's often done on woodland trails, where uneven terrain makes speeding up and slowing down feel natural. The hills practically make the game up for you.

But I can play with speed on a track or road as well, alternating hard bursts with recovery running. The irregularity is part of the appeal. It's still a tough workout, so for an amateur like me, once a week was plenty.

Combined sessions

One workout can bring several types of running together.

A warm-up, intervals, a target-pace stretch, tempo work, then a cooldown, for example. Or a warm-up, tempo running, a short easy recovery, intervals, and a cooldown.

Combined sessions can be complicated for amateurs, but I occasionally enjoyed experimenting. Unlike the spontaneous feel of fartlek, these were planned, orderly workouts.

Easy recovery runs

Slow, steady running at a low heart rate, without spending more energy than necessary.

I found this useful for easing into training and getting back out after hard sessions or races. Compared with simply lying on the couch, gentle movement let me keep running while giving my body a break.

These weren't empty kilometers. In runcoin terms, I was adding to my savings. I could use all the savings I could get.

Reasons to wait

I'd have been wary of the most intense sessions with less than six months of experience or fewer than 40 km a week behind me. My approach was to build a base first, reach something like 50-plus kilometers a week, and only then experiment. Easy runs and long runs already offered more than enough to work on.

Running watches

Of all the electronic gadgets available to runners, a sports watch seems the most useful to me. Mine is a Garmin, but there are plenty of other brands: Suunto, Polar, Xiaomi, Samsung, Apple, and more. There's no shortage of reviews and comparisons. As with shoes, personal preference has a lot to do with it.

My running watch gives me a reality check. I might think I'm taking it easy while my heart rate is climbing, or feel fast when I'm actually slower than last week. Feelings can fool you. Most of the time, I trust the numbers more than my impressions.

Besides pace and heart rate, there's a wealth of information. I like examining sleep, daily steps, cadence, and elevation. In the morning I check Garmin Connect to see how well I "really" rested. On a run I use the watch to follow my heart-rate zones.

An ordinary watch is often about style, status, or self-expression. It should suit the clothes and the occasion. A sports watch stays on because it's collecting information around the clock. I stop wanting to take it off, day or night. Gradually it becomes part of me and pushes every other watch out of my life. I hadn't seen that coming.

Why enter races?

If you're an experienced or professional runner, you probably settled that question long ago. If you have never entered a race, all I can say is: it's wonderful. Truly wonderful.

Watching the series Vikings, I once had a vivid sense of the fear and excitement a medieval warrior might feel before battle. Only the front ranks could see the enemy. Everyone else saw their companions' backs and heard the rumble ahead. They checked their weapons, found their places, and waited. Would their bodies hold up? Would a muscle seize? Would their legs carry them? Then the crowd began moving, shouting encouragement, knowing that somewhere ahead each person would have to meet the test alone. Strength and luck would matter. And all this in a harsh northern climate: cold, wet, perhaps raining, not enough clothing for comfort, but too much clothing would hinder movement.

Standing in corral D before a marathon, I recognized something of that feeling. The countdown began. Spectators shouted. We counted the final seconds together. The crowd started moving, slowly at first, then faster. I saw the starting line and stepped across it. That was it. Now it was up to me. The finish, if I reached it, would tell me how well I had done.

In an app, you can pause the timer to tie a shoelace, pop into a café bathroom, or drink some water. In an official race, the clock keeps running. Every lost second is yours, and every one counts. No traffic

light to blame, no cars to let through while you secretly catch your breath. That's your time, stops and all. You gave it everything. No excuses, no asterisks.

Training is preparation for something. Every workout doesn't have to be an all-out effort; the race is where it all comes together. For a while, everyday life falls away. I find out how well I've prepared, how well I know my body, how much I've improved, and what I can do near my limit. This is the real thing. The rehearsal is over.

I wait for the date, prepare for it, and when it finally happens, it's simply wonderful.

Running with friends

I can't remember my first 10K. My first half marathon is another matter. I feared I'd give up halfway. I worked out the laps in the park and hid a water bottle behind a bench. After the first lap I sat on that bench to recover. As a workout, it was an exhausting mess: slow running, endless stops, and finally more walking than running. But I covered the distance. Two hours and forty minutes. For a while I was very proud of that.

It did wonders for my confidence. The distance no longer scared me; I'd done it. Slowly, with difficulty, I could cover the distance. No ambulance. No taxi home.

Although I can't remember my own first 10K, I vividly remember helping friends through theirs. One had run 5 and 8 km on a gym treadmill. Physically he was ready, but the round number of ten, outdoors along the waterfront, worried him. He wanted company. At the gym he could stop anytime, water was always nearby, and an instructor was around if anything went wrong. Outdoors felt like the real world. Could he keep going that long?

We met at Riverside Park, changed shoes by the car, and set off. A lovely waterfront, plenty of runners, beautiful weather. What could go wrong? I encouraged him and helped him stick with it. He finished tired and soaked, but proud. That mental barrier cracked, crumbled, and disappeared.

A year later he ran a marathon. Then he took up triathlon, completed a full Ironman, and even ran an ultramarathon in South Africa. What a guy. I'm proud to have played a tiny part in his story.

Running is intensely personal. Yet when runners meet on a route, they lift a hand in greeting. That little wave says we're in this together. It's one of the things I love about running.

Back-to-back runs

I had a theory. Run 10 or 11 km one day and the same again the next, and perhaps the body begins to accept a half-marathon's worth of work. Yes, there's a long rest between the halves, but the total becomes familiar. Maybe that helps when the halves are eventually joined.

Two runs of 11 km hardly sound outrageous. Two consecutive half marathons, though: perhaps those could help prepare me for a full marathon.

I tried that several times and hoped it helped. What encouraged me most was that the second half marathon was no slower than the first. Perhaps the second half of the real race would be manageable too.

But in June, after one of those pairs, I picked up a small injury. It didn't happen straight away, but I suspect the two were connected. A couple of days later, around the third kilometer of a run, my leg seized up. I limped to a stop and called a taxi home. Apparently I had raised the load too quickly. For a couple of days I ran only 2 or 3 km, and then recovered.



July

Am I ready?
Breathing
A feel for distance

07

Am I ready?

I came to believe that many healthy people have more endurance in reserve than they imagine. A half marathon is 21.1 km, and covering that distance with a mixture of walking and running may be within reach long before running it comfortably is. It could take a long time and be an unpleasant experience. That's very different from being prepared to race it. Still, the thought helped me stop treating the distance as something ordinary people could never do.

How fast could I cover those 21 km? There was only one way to find out. Going in unprepared probably wouldn't give me a result I'd like, so a few months of training made more sense. Regular runs soon showed me what felt comfortable, both in pace and distance. Consistent weeks of 40 km or more gave me confidence about a half marathon. In general, the more useful work I put in each week, the less time I'd need on race day.

The marathon raised the same question on a larger scale. Finishing a half made the full distance seem possible, though I still had to train for it. How long would it take? There was only one way to find out. Whatever my time, finishing my first marathon would be something to be proud of, and a personal best by default.

I saw sub-2:30 for the half and sub-4:30 for the marathon as reasonable early goals, with more than 40 km a week as a rough training target. Then came the more ambitious two-hour and four-hour barriers, and weeks above 60 km. Beyond that, ambition becomes personal. Those numbers were my way of organizing the challenge, not a formula that could guarantee anyone's result.

Breathing

When I was young, I read about Tibetan practitioners said to perform extraordinary feats.

The stories described tummo meditators drying wet sheets on their bodies in freezing mountain conditions. Through mantras and concentration, they were said to kindle an "inner fire." In the account I read, sheets were dipped into icy water and wrapped around seated monks, who competed to dry them through a cold, snowy night. The numbers ranged from three to twenty-one sheets. The image stayed with me.

The same book described lung-gom-pa, Tibetan travelers reputed to cross vast mountain distances at astonishing speeds. Reliable information was scarce. Only a few European observers had described encounters, and their accounts left a lot of gaps.

Their preparation supposedly involved intense concentration, a trance-like state, and mantras murmured during these extraordinary journeys. By day, the traveler fixed attention on a distant object and moved toward it without distraction. They seemed so focused that their bodies covered the ground on autopilot.

A mantra can be a sound, syllable, word, or group of words, often in Sanskrit, repeated for its effect on the speaker. What interested me as a runner was the rhythm it could give to breathing.

I liked the idea of a private running phrase, repeated silently to hold a rhythm. The words didn't have to mean much. What mattered was keeping my breathing steady.

I have no magic mantra for every occasion. Sometimes I use a simple "see-so." The familiar "so-ham" follows the breath: "so" on the inhale, "ham" on the exhale. There are others, such as "ham-sa" and "hey-soo." In principle, I could just as well repeat "ap-ple-pie."

A feel for distance

As you get fitter, your idea of a normal run changes. At first I only cared whether I'd run that day. Five kilometers felt like a lot; three didn't. That was my starting point.

I remember exactly when that line moved. My wife and I were vacationing in the Pinecrest Mountains, and I ran along the Clearwater River. The place could have come straight out of Gravity Falls: pines, mountains, rushing water, even a water tower. Each morning I wanted to get a little farther and see around the next bend. At that point I could run 10 km and carry on as if I hadn't trained at all. No fatigue. Eleven or twelve left my legs buzzing a little and me feeling tired through the day. The next morning, though, I could run another 10 km as if nothing had happened. This was mid-July, around the time my weeks reached 80 km or a little more. Such a fine line between ten and eleven.

I like knowing where that line is: how far I can run and get on with my day, and when I'll start feeling it afterward. As I trained, I could go farther before crossing it.

It works in reverse as well. Cut back, and smaller distances begin to feel like work again.

A sense of balance

There's a small, horseshoe-shaped bone beneath your tongue and lower jaw called the hyoid. Suspended in a network of muscles, it's the body's natural gyroscope. For a runner, that makes it important.

Where that bone sits affects how freely you breathe, how much energy you have, and how your body distributes the load. For us, the crucial question is whether we'll instinctively move straight ahead or

whether a misaligned internal gyroscope will pull us left or right, forward or backward. A shift in the hyoid can be followed by small shifts in the neck vertebrae, shoulders, and esophagus. Your balance is thrown off. Other muscles have to compensate, your arms swing awkwardly, and you tire sooner.

Try this: close your eyes and resist the urge to peek, hold your arms straight out in front of you, and march vigorously, lifting each knee toward your hands. Do thirty to fifty repetitions, then open your eyes. Still in exactly the same spot? Excellent. Your gyroscope is perfectly tuned. More likely, you'll have drifted across the room or even reached a wall. In this explanation, that means the hyoid has shifted a little and your balance is off.

During that short exercise, you've spent some of your energy on unintended movement. A small balancing error hardly matters in a cozy room or over a short distance. Out in the woods or open country, though, it can pull you off course and make navigation harder. When you run, your body keeps correcting that small fault, kilometer after kilometer, wasting valuable energy. That's energy you could save.

That's why I occasionally see a massage therapist who practices kinesiology, working to balance muscular tension throughout the body. Something tightens, your posture changes, your gait becomes a little uneven, and your feet start turning inward as you run. Twenty kilometers later, you can feel the difference.

Working with reflexes, the therapist acts on muscles in the legs, torso, and back, even those attached to the hyoid. The aim is to bring the body back into balance and address physical or emotional disturbances. It's a way of fine-tuning the body for better results. And it can improve everyday quality of life, too.

Yoga and running

At forty-five, I really don't want to get injured. All this running gives me plenty of chances to hurt myself. I'm not especially injury-prone, but I still need to pay attention.

When I was younger I practiced wushu and taekwondo. Both included stretching routines. Even after I stopped the martial arts, I kept doing familiar exercises now and then. I'm still fairly flexible and can manage most of the yoga poses I try.

After hard runs, muscles can feel tight, shaky, or prone to cramping. I had heard stretching might help, so it became part of my routine. Usually before bed, sometimes after training, I work on my hamstrings, practice the splits, and do a few other stretches.

My back and arms can feel stiff after a long run too. I especially like stretching my back.

I tried several yoga apps and settled on one with a large library of guided classes. Oddly enough, it was sponsored by a soft-cheese brand. An unexpected combination, but I liked the lessons very much.

What drew me to yoga was the lack of competition. No rankings or national championships in the classes I knew. People worked on understanding their bodies and minds. When something clicked, people enjoyed it and kept practicing, perhaps with a new goal in mind. When it didn't, they kept practicing anyway. Nobody was chasing a personal best. The point was to learn.

Ideally, recreational running could share that philosophy. Few of us will become world or national champions. The comparison that matters is usually with ourselves. Achieve something, enjoy it, set another goal. Miss a target and keep running. You haven't lost some imaginary championship. Improvement matters more than records.

Yoga and running feel like yin and yang. Each has a little of the other in it. A good yoga session and a good run can bring the same focus, the same feeling of dissolving into the world, the same awareness of your muscles working smoothly together. Get it right, and they feel surprisingly alike.



August

“For any overnight trip, take running shoes, ID, and money. You can buy the rest when you arrive.”



Travel

Running has shown me an extraordinary variety of places. A few stand out: Lhasa, at 3,650 meters - that was hard work; Paris, beside that tower; Morocco's Atlantic coast and the old streets of Marrakesh; mountains above a seaside resort; Zanzibar's Stone Town; Bukhara and Astana; and the slopes of Kilimanjaro.

Wherever I go, I try to log a new route in Nike Run Club.

Since I like mornings, I get up early and go exploring. By breakfast, I've already seen something.

Travel was one of the reasons I started running, and it still gets me out the door. Walt Whitman opens "Song of the Open Road" with "Afoot and light-hearted I take to the open road." He had the right idea. I just added a GPS watch.

I admit it: I love to travel. When I'm choosing a hotel in a new city, I check which sights I can run to. That's part of planning the trip. Even when someone else picks the hotel, I look for interesting places within running distance.

When you're sightseeing on foot, there's only so much ground you can cover. Walking is slow, there's usually too much stuff to carry, and only so many sights fit into a day. Sometimes the walk between sights drags on so long that I'm bored before I get there.

For an overnight trip, perhaps the essentials are running shoes, ID, and money. Everything else can be bought on arrival.

The endurance of our ancestors

Here's an encouraging thought: humans have remarkable potential for endurance. We can't match a cheetah's sprint, but over long distances our species has some extraordinary advantages. Our bodies can do more than we tend to give them credit for.

One hunting strategy available to our ancestors was persistence: follow prey for a long time, especially after wounding it, until it could no longer keep going. Patience and endurance could be as useful as immediate speed.

Our upright gait and our ability to shed heat through sweat are part of that story. We're not merely poor versions of four-legged sprinters. The human body has its own way of covering ground. We're built for this.

Potential isn't the same as fitness, though. A modern person still has to train. Leave the ability unused and it fades; work at it and much can be recovered.

I was particularly struck by the part of Yuval Noah Harari's *Sapiens* that describes life before agriculture, when people hunted and gathered rather than produced food. His fascination with that world was infectious.

In Harari's account, prehistoric humans were, in some ways, more capable and more intelligent than we are. They carried detailed mental maps of huge hunting grounds, knew countless plants and fungi and how to use them, understood animal behavior, and could improvise. They distinguished sounds and smells we'd miss. Harari links those demands to larger brains and stronger powers of abstract thought. They were deeply at home in their landscape, through every season. Archaeological finds suggest a varied diet drawn from many

plants and animals. How many edible plants could you find in a forest after school biology? Not many. They could. Their knowledge had to work.

People who survived childhood and avoided fatal accidents could live a long time. I pictured bodies that could do it all: fast, flexible, agile, strong, with endurance to spare. A whole society of capable minds and bodies, shaped by natural selection. We still carry some of that inheritance.

Human beings lived that way for a very long time. Farming, domestication, industry, and modern urban life arrived much later. Along the way, some once-essential skills became less important. Smell, for instance, plays a smaller role in my daily survival. How and why all this happened is another large discussion. Read Harari. Back to running.

I love that picture of our ancestors: quick, flexible, strong, and able to keep going. I want some of that. When I run, practice yoga, or lift weights, I like to think I'm getting a little closer to the varied physical lives they led. They moved, got tired, and worked up an appetite. That sounds like a life worth borrowing from.

Regular running also expands the territory I know around my home. I discover paths, shortcuts, and slopes I never noticed. I learn where a road quietly climbs, where puddles collect, where shrubs smell sweet, and where apples ripen. A more detailed map forms in my head. Running makes me feel more fully at home in the world around me.

Training for the terrain

The easiest routes are flat, with few turns or gentle curves, no climbs, and no descents. I can hold a steady pace and focus on how I feel. A running track provides that pleasantly artificial simplicity.

A big road race often has more interesting terrain, and plenty of surprises.

Running uphill is hard. Your heart works much harder and your legs tire fast. Without specific training, you slow down and feel a little wave of panic.

A friend liked training beside the river in Riverside Park, where the slopes were few and gentle. His mileage looked good, but he was unprepared for the hills in a city marathon and was bitterly disappointed with his time. The course climbed and dipped enough to accumulate hundreds of meters of ascent. Trail runners may laugh, but for someone accustomed to the flat, it was a test. Other city races can have plenty of climbing too.

I learned not to limit myself to one or two nearly flat routes. I began watching elevation gain and choosing different terrain more often. Training ought to develop more than one skill.

On a climb, I shorten my steps and try to turn my legs over faster. The hill is there for everyone, which is comforting. It may even be a chance to pass runners who haven't practiced it.

Downhill, I love the feeling of acceleration, though staying upright comes first. My steps seem enormous by my standards. Gravity is finally working for me, almost like a cheat code: each stride carries me farther. Time to let the road help.

Shoes

Shoes deserve a book of their own. Sneakers have a whole culture around them: the search for comfort, the endless designs, the chance to show a little of who you are.

Only some of those shoes are made for running, and running has its own fashions. Engineers, designers, and movement specialists keep experimenting with materials and construction, chasing the perfect shoe. The flagship models change every year. Somewhere among all those choices, there may be a pair that suits my feet and the way I run.

Runners can turn shoe selection into a full-blown obsession. I understand it. Comfort, injury concerns, and performance all feel bound up in that choice.

At major championships and the Olympics, there's an unofficial second competition: which shoes win the most medals? The established brands have their favorites, and the newcomers want a piece of the action. It's fascinating to see what a favorite athlete or team wears. An entire world of shoes.

Brand loyalty is personal. For practical purposes, my basic lineup came down to these categories.

Everyday trainers: the workhorses, used for most sessions and worn out fastest. Fairly simple, dependable shoes that feel stable on pavement, gravel, and ordinary mixed surfaces.

Compact shoes for the gym and travel. They're light and easy to pack. They squeeze into a suitcase or bag and are ready when I need them. My requirements are modest: convenient to carry, comfortable enough to use. Of course the everyday pair can go on a treadmill too, but I like having a smaller travel option.

Warm winter shoes. In freezing weather, some extra insulation is welcome. These are unlikely to be my lightest or fastest pair. I want a reliable outsole and as much grip as conditions allow. They keep me running, even if they slow me down.

Water-resistant shoes for rain and trails. A protective upper and substantial tread help on woodland paths and difficult ground.

My best racing shoes, saved for competitions and important tests. More expensive, perhaps, but light and efficient.

This is where the carbon-plated shoes come in, with their springy construction. They don't stay at their best forever, so I don't treat them as everyday workhorses. I save them for the fast days.

When I bought my first carbon pair, the salesperson warned me to think in terms of a 200 km performance life. I tried them on a 10K test run, then reserved them for the most important races. So far, every outing in them has brought a personal best.

That makes roughly five pairs in my idea of a well-prepared runner's closet. Beyond that, preference and self-expression take over.

Fit matters more than any category. I don't want a shoe squeezing my foot. I often choose about half a size more room than in everyday footwear. Get the fit wrong and my toenails pay for it, along with the rest of my feet.

The gear, part one

Strictly speaking, running takes very little: ordinary shoes, an ordinary shirt, ordinary shorts or pants. That's the minimum. What about the maximum? I suspect there's no such thing. Someone will always invent another useful-looking accessory.

We have covered shoes, but even shoes have accessories. I tried soft heel inserts placed under the insoles for extra cushioning. Inside my everyday React-foam shoes, they felt so comfortable that I forgot about them. After washing the shoes, I forgot to put them back. The next run felt considerably less pleasant. It's easy to get used to comfort. There are also little toe spacers and protectors to reduce rubbing.

Ordinary socks work, but running socks offer an astonishing range of refinements. Compression, padding over the top of the foot, moisture-wicking fibers, designs that help prevent blisters, even membranes intended to let moisture out while keeping water from entering. Some emphasize the Achilles area, ankle, heel, or toes. There are tiny summer socks, knee-high compression socks, and thick winter ones. A surprisingly rich subject.

Next up: compression calf sleeves. A wonderful invention, working on much the same principle as a supportive bandage. They fit tightly around your lower legs and support the muscles. The benefits include better circulation and faster lactate clearance: less fatigue, quicker recovery, less swelling, a lower risk of varicose veins, and fewer spasms and cramps. A small running miracle. Just get the size right. And here's a wrinkle: buy them when you first take up running and they may soon feel tight. Your calf muscles are growing! You can wear them under pants or with shorts.

Once, with a minor injury in my left leg, compression sleeves were the only thing that let me keep running. So I started wearing just the left one. Specialists told me not to do that: the compression should be the same on both legs, or I could end up with another injury. I didn't test the theory. Now I wear the pair.

At first I was embarrassed by running tights. Surely I'd look ridiculous. Then I got used to them, and now they're my favorite running clothes. Very close-fitting pants, sometimes compressive,

that stretch beautifully and work as well for stretching as for running. They're usually my base layer, sometimes the only layer. Full-length tights suit spring and fall. Three-quarter ones leave the lower legs free for summer or the gym.

The snug fit around my thighs makes me more aware of how my legs are moving. Small zippered pockets hold keys, a card, or other odds and ends. Often the pocket sits at the center of the lower back. An odd location in ordinary clothes, but excellent on a run: unobtrusive and unlikely to rub.

Ankle zippers let in air or close neatly over longer socks. Fleece-lined tights are useful when the weather turns cold.

A running belt is wonderful for a phone, keys, and gels. Smaller is better: bulky bags interfere with movement. Holding a phone is tempting because music controls, statistics, and the pause button are right there. But it changes the way my arm moves. I prefer to put the phone away and let both arms work naturally.

Running shorts differ from swim trunks or boxing shorts mostly in the details, especially seams that don't chafe. I like two-layer designs with a built-in inner liner. Check the seams in your underwear too, particularly over long distances.

One small habit: I always put a business card in a pocket or running belt. I don't normally carry identification on a run, but if I got sick or had an accident, I'd want someone to know who I was and who to call. We runners can look remarkably alike.

The gear, part two

Sports shops sell tubular neck gaiters in endless varieties, with Buff perhaps the best-known name. Warm, light, microfiber, cooling, patterned, plain, decorated with cities or mountains. I'd love to walk

the Camino de Santiago, so I bought a couple printed with the route to Santiago de Compostela. A gaiter can protect my neck, soften cold air, or cover my head against rain or sun. I end up wearing them away from running too.

There are running sunglasses and visors, nearly weightless breathable rain jackets that pack well for travel, and specialized tops, hoodies, and sweatshirts.

I'll come back to race shirts. Long-sleeved tops deserve a mention here. Some have compression panels, but their main job is to manage warmth and sweat. I never found a running-specific long-sleeved top I truly loved. Close-fitting martial-arts tops suit me better: comfortable, little rubbing, and useful in spring and fall.

People who are used to hard winters stay warm because they dress for the cold, not because they're immune to it. On days when going out for a run seems absurd, insulated vests and jackets make it seem possible again. Some look so good that I want to go out just to wear them.

I'm also comfortable in a light sports cap that covers my ears. It helps me manage warmth, keeps my earbuds in place, and removes hair from the list of things to think about. I've become so used to it that I wear one all year, even in hot weather.

My fingers get cold early. In cold conditions, the body prioritizes keeping its core warm, and my fingers and toes feel it first. Gloves help. In spring and fall I sometimes use fingerless ones, including a pair intended for gym training. In winter, every finger needs covering.

I combine these pieces in layers. Tights and a close-fitting top next to the skin; shorts and a shirt over those; then perhaps a hoodie or insulated vest. My usual aim is to feel slightly cool when I step outside.

Once I warm up, that feels comfortable. Too much insulation leaves me sweating heavily and liable to get chilled when I slow down.

For running clothes I favor colors so bright they're almost offensive. This is less about style than visibility. In darkness, whether on city streets or country roads, I want drivers and cyclists to see me. Electric orange, pink, and acid green have a practical purpose.

That's hardly the end of the clothing list, but it's already plenty. I gave the collection its own shelf: shirts, tights, socks, and all the rest. That shelf supplies more laundry than any other part of my wardrobe.

Unfamiliar routes close to home

The same route every day can become dull. A track is comfortable: a predictable surface, no hills, and an easy exit whenever I want to go home. But a curious person eventually wants more.

A small detour turns into a longer run. Before long, I've built a whole network of routes around home. I duck into courtyards, cross bridges, and find little gardens and passageways I never knew were there. Running changes the city I thought I knew.

Eventually I had a set of routes whose distance and duration I could judge pretty well. And I found so much along them: hidden pigeon lofts, a tiny converted-warehouse neighborhood, tucked-away workshops, extraordinary façades. We go through these places every day and somehow never really see them.

Living near a park doesn't mean knowing it. Most people know the comfortable, busy main paths. Run through a large park often

enough and you find unexpected trails, new entrances and exits, unfamiliar views, and birds or animals you had previously missed.

Even familiar buildings and landscapes look different from a new angle.

Running changes the scenery more quickly than walking. More trees, houses, pigeons, squirrels, flowerbeds, and paths go by. There's always something else to notice.

The more I run, the more I notice.

A park through the seasons

For a while I lived beside a park, and that was where my first runs happened. My route began with a long, gentle descent of about a kilometer, passed the bandstand along the edge of a slope, made a broad loop over a stream, and followed a dirt path through trees and playgrounds. Branching paths eventually joined a wide paved walkway full of strollers and led to the far gate. There I turned back, followed part of the same path, then took a narrow lakeside trail that climbed and dropped sharply over a dozen little hills. Across the stream feeding the lake, through a flat dog-walking area and a birch grove, and I was back at the start. About 6 km. So most of my early runs were roughly 6 km, just that one lap.

I could watch the park change through the year from my apartment windows. But being out in it was something else. Running got me there much more often. I came to know it differently.

I started in summer, when the park was lively, shady, and dry. The leaves slowly yellowed as my distances grew. I had more time to notice nature's unhurried changes. Falling leaves, squirrels, ducks: I was getting sentimental about the place. With each run I could see a little farther through the thinning trees. Then one day I could barely

begin. My gentle descent was covered with a perfectly smooth film of ice. After sliding twenty or thirty meters, I decided not to tempt fate and went shopping for winter shoes. That's how I acquired my first waterproof Nike Lunarglide Flash pair. At the time, their grip felt almost as secure on ice as on pavement. The next day I gleefully passed cautious, sliding pedestrians.

Snow covered the park, frost arrived, and my choice of paths narrowed. I couldn't always complete the old loop. But the winter woods were astonishingly clean and beautiful: bright shoes on fresh snow, branches bending overhead. I got my runs in knowing that without running I'd have missed much of this.

Then spring: weaving around puddles, spotting the first flowers, leaves, bumblebee, or butterfly. I'd get home and tell the children what I'd seen. I was their advance scout for spring.

We say we want to be closer to nature, then drive too fast to notice the seasons or walk only as far as the nearest stop. Running through parks, along rivers, and through neighborhoods farther from home gives me a wider, more intimate view of the world.

Run every day and each day leaves a trace, in memory and in the training log.

The sights

The more I run, the more I see. One of running's great pleasures is coming upon a famous landmark from an unexpected direction.

City-marathon organizers often design courses to show off their city. Twenty-one or forty-two kilometers can take in a remarkable amount of architecture and scenery. London, Berlin, Barcelona: a whole sequence of landmarks in a single day. Now that is a sightseeing tour.

Outside races, I can invent a private tour and collect experiences you won't find in a guidebook. Some are so cinematic that I feel I have wandered into a film, surrounded by impossibly convincing scenery.

A few years earlier, I had traveled to Tibet to walk the kora around Mount Kailash. Our small group flew through Guangzhou to Lhasa, then planned to continue north by bus. Lhasa itself was a place I had long dreamed of seeing. I had read about the ancient city and especially the Potala Palace, the Dalai Lama's historic residence, whose image I associated with *Seven Years in Tibet* and Brad Pitt.

Lhasa sits roughly 3,650 meters above sea level. Coming from lower ground, I was short of breath almost as soon as I got off the plane. My head buzzed. A few steps wore me out. I wanted to stop and catch my breath. At first I moved slowly, as if I were wading through water. I felt almost drunk.

Fortunately, the body can adapt to its surroundings. At first the thin air puts a strain on your blood and circulation, leaving you weak. Gradually, your blood chemistry changes and you get used to the new conditions. Besides, Lhasa is full of children, older people, and shopkeepers going about ordinary life. Clearly, living here is possible. Give it a little time and things will get easier.

That first night, my head hurt. Sleep was uneasy, street sounds seemed strange, and anxious dreams interrupted my breathing. Yet being in such a mysterious place was thrilling.

At about six the next morning, I put on my running shoes, checked the map, and set off for the Potala Palace. The city was still sleepy, with little traffic. Running along an old street, I imagined yak caravans passing the same way. Up there the colors seemed more intense. Yellow was yellower than at sea level. Blue was unbelievably blue.

I had to stop and walk repeatedly. The breathlessness was severe. I passed a bored police officer and the first workers hurrying about their business. I noticed people listening to music through large speakers, gathering around them or sitting beside them on benches. Everyone seemed to be recording voice messages on a phone.

I didn't have to negotiate a maze of alleys. The main avenue brought me to the palace in the rising sun. It was extraordinary. How had anyone built something so magnificent, so high up, in that stark landscape? Amid a stream of people going about their morning, I stood before the entrance, simply happy to be there. I was standing inside a movie.

On the way back, small figures in matching school uniforms gathered outside a school. Parents kissed them goodbye and handed over their breakfasts. A lovely, ordinary scene.

Five or six kilometers, and I was back before breakfast. I had already seen the Potala in unusual light, the morning routines, the police officers and shopkeepers, while the rest of the group was still at the hotel brushing their teeth. I felt like the group's scout. Just a run? Yes. Also a taste of life I wouldn't have had without running.

Later that day we toured the palace, went inside, and climbed onto its walls. Wonderful. But without the sunrise encounter, something would have been missing. That part of the experience was mine alone.



September

Sex and running
At the track with Yasso
Shirts worth paying for

09

Sex and running

In a book about public speaking, I once came across a chapter about sex. Regular sex, it suggested, improved concentration and generally put the speaker in a better mood. My first thought was: well, damn, apparently you can work sex into absolutely any book.

You see where this is going?

Many city dwellers spend the day sitting at a desk. Poor circulation in the pelvis can affect erections. Running gets that circulation going, so there's another reason to move: it can help prevent problems and get things working again if they've gone off track.

I think we can leave the subject there. No further details required.

At the track with Yasso

Track running doesn't offer much variety. The same laps, the same flat surface. Nothing gets in the way, except the boredom. Even the route map looks bored.

On the other hand, a track removes many obstacles to speed. If I can keep boredom at bay, it's a good place to find out how fast I can run a chosen distance, whether 5, 10, or 21 km.

A standard lap is 400 meters, making a track ideal for Yasso 800s, an interval workout named after runner and coach Bart Yasso.

The idea is to run hard for 800 meters, then take an easy jogging recovery.

The memorable rule of thumb links the interval time in minutes and seconds with a marathon time in hours and minutes. An 800 in 3:40 suggests a 3:40 marathon as a possible target; under four minutes suggests aiming under four hours. Recovery takes about as long as

the fast interval. It's a training comparison, not a guarantee of a marathon result.

Repeat the intervals several times. Start with two or three early in the training cycle and gradually build to ten. There's no need to go beyond ten. As race day approaches, bring the number back down to two or three.

I like the neat link between minutes on the track and hours in a marathon. But it's a rough training comparison, not a reliable forecast. A few fast repeats won't tell me how my endurance, fueling, or race-day conditions will affect the full 42.2 km. Twenty or thirty minutes on the track won't reveal my marathon time. I still have to run the race.

It's a demanding workout, and there's a risk of injury. Take the warm-up seriously: run an easy 2 or 3 km and get properly warmed up before starting the intervals.

After that faster running, marathon pace can feel almost easy. The session works on strength and aerobic capacity. It might even make you like the track.

Shirts worth paying for

Organized races often include a shirt in your registration. Bright colors, the race name across the front: an instant souvenir. Wear it among thousands of other runners and you feel part of something. I enjoy that.

But how good is the shirt? It was probably bought in bulk with price in mind. Or supplied by a sponsor who may not have chosen the most expensive item in the catalog.

For an important race, I prefer a shirt I bought myself and have already tested. I want to know it fits, handles sweat, and doesn't chafe. Race day is a lousy time to find out your shirt isn't up to the job.

The souvenir shirts can join the collection and come out on ordinary training runs. Seeing another runner in a shirt I recognize is a pleasure: I was at that race too, buddy!

So I made sure I had at least a couple of shirts I'd chosen myself and could trust completely.

Nipples

An unexpected running subject, but a practical one. During a long run, fabric rubbing against a man's nipples can break the skin and cause bleeding. Some runners tape them beforehand to prevent it.

I owned a soccer shirt that felt great and looked good. Somehow it was excellent for exactly ninety minutes. The length of a soccer match, conveniently enough. Keep running beyond that, and it began to rub.

An untested shirt on a half marathon or longer can leave a pair of alarming red streaks down the front.

Short toenails

A tiny detail I learned the bloody way. Literally. Before a long race, I trim my toenails. On a short run, a sharp edge may just annoy me. Over a half marathon or more, it can cut into the skin. The evidence is on my socks afterward.

A nail pressing against the shoe can also become badly damaged, even come off. An ugly sight. I'd rather avoid it.

Before a big race, I set a reminder to check and trim my toenails carefully, even if they don't look long.

Entering the Big Race

Big doesn't have to mean long. It could be a 5K, a 10K, a half marathon, or a marathon. What matters is that it's your big race. You'll build your training around it, aiming to arrive in peak shape and run a personal best. Once you've done that, of course, you'll want to beat it.

The entry form asks for name, age, sex, and an expected finish time. This is no place for unnecessary modesty. I enter a realistic target rather than automatically repeating an old training result. Ambitious, but honest. Wild optimism is no more helpful than false modesty.

Runners are assigned to starting corrals, generally faster first and slower farther back. Predict too slow a finish and the first kilometers may be spent weaving through a dense crowd moving below your pace. Those lost seconds or minutes can haunt you later. A 3:59 marathon feels very different from 4:01. That's why I try to avoid excessive modesty. Only the excessive kind.

For an out-of-town race, I prefer a hotel close to the start and finish. I can stay warm and comfortable a little longer before stepping into the wind or rain. If I can't get a cab, I can still walk to the start.

Preparing for the Big Race

Before an important half marathon or marathon, I need to arrive rested. I've trained for months and logged hundreds of kilometers, but I still have to run the race. Over a long distance, anything can happen. Marathons are often held on Sundays, so the calendar starts revolving around one particular Sunday.

Those final weeks of reduced training before a big race are called the taper.

A tempting mistake is to cram in the work I missed. Too late. I can't make up for missed training by piling on extra runs now. I'd rather arrive a little undertrained than spend the energy I need for the race.

Before a race where you plan to give everything and run your best time, you need to cut back your training and arrive in peak shape. You can't carry on as usual and simply turn up at the start. Race day needs its own preparation.

In the last couple of weeks, keep your runs easy, at a low heart rate, with only very short bursts of speed. Very short. That gives small injuries a chance to heal, even the ones you haven't noticed. A massage or a visit to a manual therapist can help release tightness and tension. Your body can replenish the minerals you've used up and restore its hormone levels and glycogen stores. The aim is to arrive at the start recovered and ready.

I tried several approaches, including stopping completely for the last few days. That didn't work very well for me.

Cutting my running in half all at once wasn't ideal either. I felt as though my body adjusted to the lower workload without the growing sense of stored energy I wanted. The drop was too sudden for my liking.

My best final week was a gradual step-down:

Monday, my usual 10 km; Tuesday, eight; Wednesday, six; Thursday, four; Friday, two; Saturday, one. Then 42.2 km on Sunday. A little less running each day. Those were my numbers, not a universal prescription.

This is where less running pays off. You cut back, and for a while you have more speed and endurance at your disposal. The trick is to time it for race day.

The taper plays tricks on my mind. There's a name for this: taper tantrums. Apparently, anxiety doesn't taper. I start feeling that fitness is slipping away. It's tempting to test myself. I try not to. This is a time to trust the plan rather than every passing sensation, like flying by instruments in poor visibility. Calm and confidence help. My feelings have fooled me before.

During a taper, I kept thinking something was wrong: I'd race badly, I'd made a mistake somewhere. But cutting back had always worked for me, as it had for millions of other runners. I had to remember that.

The final days

On the Friday before a Sunday race, I prioritize rest. No heroic sightseeing walks. As little stress as possible. No dramatic experiments with food or the daily routine.

In the days before the race, increase your carbohydrates: oatmeal, bananas, pasta. Ease off protein-heavy foods such as fried meat, eggs, and cured meats, along with cultured dairy products, seafood, and dried fruit. Otherwise you may spend more of the race thinking about digestion than you'd like. Sorry, but it needs saying. Drink plenty, too, more than usual.

Runners have some funny pre-race rituals. One is taking a picture of all your gear laid out: shoes, shirt, bib, gadgets, gels. The flat runner: somehow, the clothes always look calmer than the person who'll be wearing them. It has a purpose. That photo doubles as a checklist and a dress rehearsal. Besides, there's something reassuring about doing what the other runners do.

Then there's the pasta party: runners gathering over spaghetti and other carbohydrate-rich dishes. A tradition I find easy to support.

Please remember the toenails. I'm begging you.

My firm rule is nothing new on race day. Shoes have to be tested, even expensive racing shoes with a short racing life. I run in them beforehand, then set them aside. The same goes for socks, compression wear, and everything else. I want to know the size is right and nothing rubs. A long race offers enough surprises without adding my own.

My race-day checklist:

- Running shoes I trust.
- A tested, non-chafing shirt or top.
- Shorts or tights.
- Familiar, comfortable underwear.
- Running socks.
- Compression socks or calf sleeves, if I plan to use them.
- Phone and headphones.
- Sports watch or heart-rate monitor.
- Running belt.
- Familiar fuel: gels, a sports drink, or an energy bar.

- My chosen cap, headband, or bandana - in my case, usually a light hat.
- Sports sunglasses for sunny weather.
- A rain poncho if the forecast calls for one.
- ID, race packet, and bib.
- Dry clothes for after the finish.
- Roomy, comfortable shoes to change into.
- A bag for the clothes I leave at the start.

I usually pick up my race packet a day or two beforehand. While I'm there, I find the changing areas, bag drop, and bathrooms, including any tucked-away ones that might have shorter lines. I work out how long it'll take to get there on race morning and check which roads will be closed.

The evening before, I aim for a couch, a book or movie, and very little else. Rest comes first. I go to bed early, without expecting perfect sleep. Even a confident person may feel nervous. Going to bed early at least gives me more time to rest if I toss and turn.

From the couch, I study the course. Which sights will appear at which kilometer? Where are the climbs, descents, turns, bridges, and aid stations? Organizers often provide an elevation profile. I want a rough sense of where I can relax and where I'll have to work harder.

I choose a playlist, or set up the metronome.

Then I run the course in my head: 5, 8, 10, 16, 21, 40 km, imagining myself moving through each point calmly. A pleasant thought to fall asleep with.

Race day

I set two alarms five minutes apart. Sleeping through the race I spent half a year preparing for is a runner's nightmare. I'd rather not rely entirely on my internal clock.

About two hours before the marathon, have a carb-rich breakfast: oatmeal, rice porridge, or pasta, plus a banana and sweet tea.

I check that the phone and headphones are charged. Until bag drop, I may keep the phone connected to a power bank. One less worry.

I try not to overdress. Running faster generates more heat, and an extra jacket or long-sleeved shirt can become a nuisance. If my bib and timing chip are on that outer layer, taking it off gets complicated. A disposable poncho, or one I can pack away, keeps me warm while I wait without leaving me stuck with another layer during the race.

I don't want to arrive so early that I become cold or bored. Roughly an hour to an hour and a half before the start usually gives me time to change, drop off my bag, and still have thirty or forty minutes to get ready without rushing.

Use that time to stretch, more carefully than you've ever stretched in your life. Bounce around a little, do a few short runs of twenty to fifty meters to warm up, and get in line for the bathroom. Losing minutes to an urgent stop later would be frustrating.

Running a little late isn't always a disaster. At many races, getting everyone across the start takes time, and later waves still get an official time. I check how the race handles this rather than panic over every minute spent in line. Better to be ready on time, of course.

I'll probably meet someone I know. A quick "Have a great race!" is enough. Neither of us needs a long conversation breaking our concentration.

Marathon

Marathon is a small town in East Attica, Greece, with roughly seven thousand residents. So only about seven thousand people can claim to be Marathoners by birth or address. The rest of us, millions of us, have borrowed the name. Me included.

I suspect the town's name is spoken around the world more often than Athens. We runners have something to do with that. For many people who take up running, the marathon is the big dream: the race you want to finish, the distance that earns respect.

Once I began running, I wanted to visit Marathon. Eventually I did. Friends and I drove through low hills, across streams, and along tree-lined roads. I imagined the ancient messenger passing through something like that landscape to announce victory over the Persians. I expected a shrine to the running community, something that captured what running means to us. Instead I found a seaside town, ordinary Greek restaurants, and a modest statue of a warrior commemorating the battle. A monument to a military victory, rather than to our modern obsession.

According to the Greek legend runners keep telling one another, we owe the marathon to a soldier and messenger named Pheidippides. In 490 BC, the Greeks defeated the Persians, and he set off for Athens to announce the victory. Apparently he never stopped. He must have been running at a ridiculous heart rate, with no aid stations and dying of thirst. He reached Athens, shouted the news, and dropped dead from exhaustion. A sad story that historians have attributed to Plutarch's imagination. Still, it refuses to die.

When the modern Olympics began in Athens in 1896, following Pierre de Coubertin's revival of the Games, the program included a race inspired by that route. Spiridon Louis won in about two hours and fifty-eight minutes. The course was approximately 40 km.

Early Olympic marathon distances varied, roughly from 40 to 42.75 km, as routes and finishes were arranged around local conditions and the stadium spectacle. The marathon became one of the Games' most prestigious events, traditionally placed near the close of the track-and-field program.

The 1908 London race used the distance we now recognize, 26 miles and 385 yards. The route from Windsor Castle to the stadium, with its carefully positioned finish, produced that unusual total.

Subsequent Games still used other distances, but in 1921 the governing federation standardized the marathon at 42 km and 195 meters.

Today the world offers hundreds of marathons and half marathons. Literally hundreds. Perhaps one of them will become yours. I hope so.

The Abbott World Marathon Majors now span eight cities: Tokyo, Boston, London, Berlin, Chicago, New York, Sydney, and Cape Town. Cape Town's first race as a Major is scheduled for 2027. For many runners, the thought of running them all is a dream of its own.

A strategy for the Big Race

The night before, it's too late to train. It isn't too late to think. I can decide how to approach the half marathon or marathon I have prepared for.

The tempting beginner's strategy: run hard while you've got the energy, bank a little time, and somehow survive the rest. Trouble is,

you burn through that energy early. Somewhere along the way, you hit the wall. Moving gets hard. By the end, I'm wondering why I ever signed up, dragging myself forward on willpower, sometimes walking. Those slow final kilometers wipe out every second I thought I'd saved at the start.

A bad strategy. Possibly the worst. Naturally, it was the one I used in my first marathons. Reading about other runners reassured me that I wasn't uniquely foolish. A small comfort.

A more promising approach is the negative split: start conservatively and run the second half faster than the first. Many outstanding performances follow that pattern. For a beginner, it can sound almost impossible.

If I've finished a race barely able to move my legs, I find it hard to believe the second half could ever be faster. Surely it must be harder and slower? Yet experienced runners do accelerate later. If they can learn it, perhaps amateurs can too.

I also considered dividing the distance into thirds. First, a little slower than target pace, which suits the crowded start. Second, settle into target pace and begin passing people who started too fast. Third, accelerate if possible; otherwise hold the pace from the middle third. It's a compromise rather than an elegant formula, which naturally made me want to try it. Sometimes I managed neither a controlled start nor a strong finish.

The simpler advice was to start a little slower than my realistic target pace and build from there. That works with a crowded start anyway: the field takes time to spread out. A slow start doesn't have to ruin the race. I'd tried several approaches, and this one worked for me.

Say you're aiming for a four-hour marathon. You'll need to average about 5:41 per kilometer. It's a long race, with time to make up a few minutes. Start gently and you won't lose control of your breathing,

send your heart rate soaring, or use up your strength in the first half. Exhausted muscles won't recover before the finish. Once you're warmed up and your breathing and movements have settled into a rhythm, you can gradually pick up the pace. Then a little more, as long as you've got the strength. Hearing your app announce a faster average pace is encouraging. Hearing that you're slowing down can be crushing: the goal is slipping away. And it probably is. Listen to your body before things get desperate. I find it helps to break the distance into checkpoints. Rounded down to 42 km, it's a convenient number: halves, thirds, or quarters.

Nothing complicated.

For example:

At 4 km, roughly 10% is done. It still feels easy.

I remind myself there are about nine more chunks that size.

At 6 km, about 15% done. That's the first chunk plus another half.

At 10 km, almost a quarter is behind me.

Three more familiar tens, then a little extra.

At 14 km, a third done. Good. Maybe time to pick up the pace a little.

21 km: halfway. Yes! You've covered this distance in training, though the finish will be harder than usual. 28 km: two-thirds done. Not much left; time to see what you've got. 40 km: nearly there. Use whatever's left in the tank.

I like the three-part strategy best. In the first third, I make myself slow down, watch my heart rate, and enjoy how easy it feels. In the second, I panic that I won't hit my target and speed up. By the final third, I feel as if I'm running late. Time to push and win back those

lost seconds. It's a familiar, urgent feeling: don't miss it, get there in time. Like running for the bus when I was young.

I like competing. Sometimes I want to pass the runner ahead of me just for the hell of it. Usually there's no point. I'm not racing for a podium spot. The race that matters is against my own previous times. Better to settle in and let my body do what I've spent months teaching it.

The little personal disasters usually come late. Walking when all I want is to run. Feeling I've let myself down. Seeing other runners drop out. Hitting the wall.

I need some plan in my head. A pace band on the wrist can help too, saving me from doing complicated math with kilometers, minutes, and three-digit numbers.

For a first half marathon or marathon, there's another comforting thought: any finish establishes a personal best. There's no need to set the bar impossibly high. Next year's self will want something to improve. Leave that future runner a little room.

What to do during the Big Race

When I learned to drive, the number of things to manage seemed impossible: accelerator, clutch, brake, gears, speed, road signs, traffic, lane markings, engine temperature, fuel, turn signals, wipers. Later I could handle the essentials while also listening to music, talking to passengers, and noticing the world outside. The task had become familiar.

With practice, I stopped having to think about every little thing. My brain knew what needed attention.

A race has its own dashboard: pace and heart rate, hills and turns, how far I've gone and how much is left, the next aid station, cadence, foot placement, arm swing, breathing, pacers. With experience, I have room to notice more: music in my ears, an attractive runner, someone in a ridiculous costume, a beautiful building beside the course. I can even think about tomorrow's work or a new workout to try. It all becomes as natural as driving.

The runners around me are interesting to watch. The elite field is far ahead, though an out-and-back section may let me see them coming toward me. The slowest runners are behind. Most people nearby are at roughly my level. I watch how they run, looking for wasted effort: a bobbing head, an awkward landing, excessive arm swing. Then I check myself for the same thing. Economy matters over a long distance. When my own form starts falling apart, fatigue is taking over. "Pull yourself together," I tell myself, and try to get my form back.

Make some decisions beforehand so you don't waste time and energy debating them on the course. Which aid stations will you stop at, and which will you skip? Plan your drinking rather than leaving the decision until you're thirsty. Will you run your own race or stay with a particular pacer? Settle those questions now.

Some situations leave no room for debate. If you feel unwell, stop and ask for help. Let's be honest: an amateur race isn't a matter of national honor. We're mostly here to enjoy ourselves. Seriously, unless you're a professional, this is a hobby. No personal best is worth risking your health. Sadly, you often see medical teams helping a runner who misjudged their limits. If you feel ill, don't waste time wondering what to do.

A useful mental game is to count what remains instead of how far I've already run. The app says 25 km, then thirty, and the mind responds: that's so much, no wonder I'm exhausted.

I try the reverse: only 10 km left, one last familiar ten. Now just three, perhaps twelve or fifteen minutes. Then I can stop, eat a banana, take a selfie, smile. Hold on. If I have the strength to pick it up, I'll be there sooner.

Another thought amuses me. A four-hour marathon means four hours of effort, doubts, bargaining, and discomfort. The champions run for only a little over two. In that sense they have it easier! Less time to hold their nerve, fewer minutes of questioning everything, earlier access to drinks and selfies. One more reason to get faster: the ordeal ends sooner. Two hours sounds better than four.

Cross the finish line and one thing is certain: there's life after 42.2 km. I'm here. I'm alive. I'm a marathoner, not just someone who hopes to be one someday. I belong to that worldwide club now. All those months of doubts, early alarms, aching muscles, and battered toenails have an answer. Whatever the clock says, I've earned this medal.



October

“The big race is over. You gave it everything, and now you have a time on the board. Whatever it says, you’ve earned a celebration.”

10

Coming down from race day

The big race is over. You gave it everything, and now you have a time on the board. Whatever it says, you've earned a celebration.

In the final kilometers, a dangerous thought often sneaks in: why am I doing any of this? I want nothing except for it to end. Yet a few minutes after finishing, I begin thinking about next time. Better next time. Plans form, and gradually I believe it again: the show must go on.

After the race, you're soaked and exhausted, and your feet are swelling. Time for cooling gel on your legs and a change into dry clothes. Some marathons offer a post-finish massage. The people who give those massages are saints. Nothing else feels quite that heavenly.

If there's food, eat. Your body has burned a lot of calories and needs to start recovering. Now. I burn more than 3,500 calories in a marathon, more than an average person uses in a day: a day to a day and a half's worth of energy. It's as if you've lived an extra day, compressed into a few hours. Of course your body needs rest. If you can, go and sleep for an hour or an hour and a half. Take care of your feet, shower, and sleep.

The next few days won't be easy. However experienced you are, you've put your body through enormous stress. It needs its resources for recovery, so let it rest. But that doesn't mean doing nothing.

If you aren't injured, stretch regularly, a little more than usual, and do some light recovery exercise. I tried stopping altogether and waiting for my fitness to return. Hopeless. Passive rest alone wasn't bringing it back.

So running in the days after a marathon makes sense to me. The muscles will hurt, but they'll be working their way back into action.

The sooner I can return to my usual routine, the better. I normally use a reverse staircase: 1 to 3 km the day after the race, then gradually add 2 or 3 km at a time until I'm back to my usual distances.

Experts generally advise against racing more than one marathon a season. I'd get bored. I want to test myself more often.

Exercise testing

A runner's relationship with their heart tends to follow a familiar path.

As a child, you discover your pulse. For years, checking it means two fingers on your wrist, the way your grandmother showed you. Mostly you forget about it, except when your heart starts racing.

You take up a sport without initially caring much about the number. Then you read something, become curious, and buy a fitness tracker or watch. Its readings aren't always consistent, and occasionally it frightens you.

The inconsistency becomes irritating, so you buy a dedicated heart-rate monitor. Better data makes you want still more data. You start examining resting pulse, sleep records, and every rise and fall during a run. What happened there? What did that spike mean?

Next come zone tables, gadget defaults, perhaps a more expensive watch. You begin organizing workouts around heart-rate zones.

Eventually, after a few marathons, you find yourself running uphill on a treadmill in a mask that looks suspiciously like bondage gear. You're wired up like an astronaut or a test pilot, and someone's taking blood from your finger. Disappointment, skepticism, protest, acceptance: you cycle through them pretty quickly.

My turn came too. After asking around among my running friends, I decided I needed a professional assessment. I had no coach; all the opinions on my running had come from fellow amateurs. I visited a sports-medicine center after a marathon in which I'd run much faster than before. I wanted to find out what kind of shape this magnificent body was really in.

Somewhere deep down, I hoped the test would reveal that I was exceptionally gifted. Or at least a little better than most.

No such luck. The center saw plenty of athletes, and I wasn't about to amaze anyone. What I could get was useful information and heart-rate zones that actually fit me.

The test worked like this. I ran on a treadmill that gradually got faster and steeper. Sensors recorded my heart's activity. A breathing mask measured the gases going in and out, giving information about oxygen use and carbon dioxide production. Finger-prick samples taken while I was moving showed how blood lactate changed as the work increased.

The treadmill kept getting faster and steeper, entirely unimpressed by my suffering. It kept tormenting me until I reached the limit of what I could sustain and asked to stop. "Everybody asks eventually," said the young doctor, an accomplished runner herself. Nobody defeats the treadmill.

The results showed how my lactate levels rose as the effort increased, along with how hard I could push in that test. For someone curious about running, seeing actual measurements of what was happening inside me was fascinating.

I left the torture chamber with the graph, individually assessed heart-rate zones, and recommendations for a few additional checks.

I wasn't some freak of nature. I was a pretty ordinary guy. After thinking it over, I decided I could live with that. At least the photos looked dramatic.

I immediately changed the watch settings to use my own measured zones. The test didn't otherwise transform my training. I carried on much as before, only now I understood more and worried less.

Fall running

Fall may be the most productive running season. Many famous marathons take place then. Perhaps a northern-hemisphere summer gives runners time to prepare and arrive ready for their best performance.

The fall race calendar gives runners plenty to look forward to.

Amateurs get their chance too. I've put in the work through spring and summer. Now I get to see whether it paid off.

The cooler weather feels made for running. Around 10°C is often mentioned as a favorable temperature. I remember reading about the carefully chosen conditions in Vienna for Eliud Kipchoge's INEOS 1:59 Challenge, when he covered the marathon distance in under two hours.

After summer heat, a cool run feels like stepping from a scorching beach into an air-conditioned hotel. I liked fall before I ran. Running made me love it.

Even without a time target, what could beat a golden woodland with leaves falling around me? Morning, leaves rustling underfoot, all that beauty. I feel less thirsty, the pace often comes more easily than in summer, and my mood rises with it.

Fall is the perfect season for running. Officially.

Going for a hundred

In June, six months into the year, I had aimed for roughly 80 km a week. Tapering for the marathon and recovering afterward interrupted that rhythm. Once I was back, I began wondering whether I could manage 100 km in a week.

It wasn't easy. The main obstacle was time rather than how my legs felt. At around five minutes per kilometer, 11 km fits into about an hour. I can fit an hour a day around work. More than that gets tricky. A hundred kilometers means roughly 15 km a day if I run all seven days, more if I do not. Add changing, showering, and dealing with the laundry, and the whole routine approaches two hours.

Weekends offer some extra space, but it's still a large commitment. For a limited period before a major race, I could imagine clearing some space in my schedule to chase that beautifully round number: one hundred.

I completed my first 100 km week at the end of September, ahead of a half marathon in Kingsford. It felt strange. In February, 100 km had been an entire month's work. Now I had done it in a week. I was thrilled. I felt ready for bigger races.

Twice a day

Occasionally, especially in summer, I felt good, had time, and ran in both the morning and the evening. There was no plan behind it.

Then I read about Eliud Kipchoge's training. The first man to cover a marathon distance in under two hours: a Kenyan runner with a farm, a wife, children, and cows. Also an astonishingly effective running machine. Of course I wanted to know how he trained.

Copying his schedule wouldn't produce his results. His team designed the workload for his exceptional body and experience. He also trained at around 2,000 meters, then raced in the more oxygen-rich conditions near sea level. Still, I was curious. What did the champion's days look like?

In the account I read, there was no mysterious trick. Enormous volume, around 170 to 190 km a week, much of it fast by amateur standards, alongside plenty of genuinely easy recovery running. There wasn't much about the gym in that account. Mostly, he ran. It was strikingly simple.

What especially caught my attention was the frequency of two-a-day sessions. Not every day, but very often. A longer morning run, perhaps 15 to 20 km, and about ten in the evening. That was how the kilometers added up.

The morning might contain tempo work, fartlek, or intervals. The evening was usually gentler. After a particularly long or hard morning, more than 21 km, the evening could be free.

My own difficulty with doubles was finding the hours. Even if I could run 20 km in one outing, two separate tens took longer overall. Twice the changing, leaving the house, warming up, showering, and putting things away. The same distance, more logistics.

Doubles had their appeal. Breaking up the distance changed how it felt. More runs also gave me more chances to experiment.

But professionals can spend several hours a day on sport because it's their job. For an amateur with work, family, ordinary obligations, and other interests, that time is a luxury.

Two sessions can also mean more total load than a person can absorb. Enthusiasm doesn't remove the need for judgment.

Still, I liked the idea of setting aside some time - a week, perhaps a longer block - in which I could experiment and feel a tiny bit like Kipchoge.

When people say, "You should try everything once," they usually seem to mean sex or drugs. Why be so unimaginative? Try running twice a day.

Will running eat my muscles?

Bullshit. Running doesn't shrink your muscles or eat them away.

In one of his books, Nassim Nicholas Taleb describes falling into the trap of confusing cause and effect. He started swimming seriously because he wanted... a swimmer's body. You know the look: tall, handsome champions, broad shoulders, narrow waists, powerful chests. Swimming wouldn't make him taller, obviously. But the rest? After a while, Taleb noticed his shape wasn't changing much. Then he realized it wasn't his fault. Broad-shouldered people with streamlined bodies win swimming races because their bodies suit the sport. The sport didn't give them those bodies.

Running is much the same. Famous distance runners are lean, even skinny, with long limbs and narrow shoulders. If you're built differently, running won't turn you into one of them. Reaching the very top takes certain genetic advantages.

Running doesn't consume your muscles for fuel. It gradually reduces your overall body fat. You lose weight, and the muscles you already have become more defined and visible. Your leg muscles grow and firm up. With less fat covering them, the veins stand out too. It looks good. You'll still look like yourself, just with less body fat.

Our genetic makeup is individual. But taking up running doesn't mean saying goodbye to your muscles.



November

The wall
Old shoes
Running fuel



The wall

Running spends the energy we have stored through eating, training, and recovery. Carbohydrate and fat are major sources, but the body can't draw on them at the same rate. Carbohydrate can supply energy more quickly. As intensity rises, reliance on it increases; easier aerobic running uses a mixture.

The body stores carbohydrate as glycogen in the liver and muscles. Estimates put the average reserve at around 3,000 to 3,500 calories, enough for roughly 30 to 35 km of hard running, since your body won't spend every last bit. When glycogen runs low, you meet every runner's nightmare: the wall. You simply can't hold your pace. Your body starts conserving the remaining carbohydrate and relying more on fat for fuel. But fat supplies energy much more slowly, so you have to ease off and run at a slower, more aerobic effort. Meanwhile, you're also losing water, salts, and minerals through sweat and breathing. Cramps can set in, and you may become disoriented.

Most of my regular training runs stop short of that point, and my long runs generally top out at thirty kilometers or less. Beyond that, I feel like an astronaut stepping out of the spacecraft. I've read about it; now I have to find out for myself. A marathon takes me into that unknown and shows me what it feels like.

For a fast marathon, I can't assume my starting reserves will comfortably cover everything. Elite runners take fuel and fluids on the course too. That's why major races provide aid stations, often every five to seven kilometers, with water and some combination of gels, bananas, sports drinks, or bars.

Old shoes

Musicians choose their instruments carefully, look after them, and gradually make them part of themselves. A carpenter, painter, or firefighter might feel the same about the tools that let them do their best work. Running shoes become part of your story too. A bad pair is a fling you'd rather forget. The right pair? That's true love.

Unfortunately, that love has an expiration date. When the shoes wear out, I put them in the box the new pair came in and remember where they took me, who I was when we met, and who I am now. It's a strangely tender goodbye. Eventually, feeling a little guilty, I let them go. This time, for good.

At our events agency, we once lined a walkway with runners' shoes for ASICS. It was one of the most moving projects we had done. Maybe that was just me, but there are shoes I still miss. I can't step into the same river twice or repeat the past. Paying my respects to old shoes is part of the running ritual.

Running fuel

Sports nutrition fills whole books, and different sports make different demands. That shouldn't be surprising.

When I lifted weights, I grew used to thinking about protein shakes and feeding muscle. With more running, my preferences shifted naturally. Oatmeal and pasta became more appealing than another plate of eggs. My body seemed to be lobbying for fuel. There's even a word for a runner's appetite: *runger*. Hunger with a training plan.

For a long time, I underestimated gels. I thought there was something noble about avoiding "all those chemicals" and running on water and fruit, like our ancestors. Then I changed my mind.

Convenient fuel, with electrolytes when needed, could replace what I was using on a long run. Why not let science help, damn it? I started taking gels during some races.

A coach is probably better placed to plan how many gels to take, when to take them, and in what order. My approach is to spread them evenly along the course. Taking two? Divide the distance into thirds and have one at each third. Taking three? Divide it into quarters. And so on. I figure six is probably enough.

One marathon fueling plan I found began around 7 or 8 km and continued roughly every 5 km.

The idea is that gels are absorbed quickly, but not instantly. First you use the energy already available: carbohydrate in the blood, muscles, and liver. The first gel comes after thirty or forty minutes, then another every 5 to 7 km. Refuel as your reserves run down, use that fuel, then top up again. Remember that absorption takes time. A gel taken with only 2 to 4 km left may not have time to make a difference.

There are isotonic gels and gels with electrolytes. They help you take in fluid, replace salts and minerals, and add carbohydrate, with different products supplying different amounts. The details are on the packet.

Caffeinated gels are meant to give you a lift, help you focus, and provide a burst of energy. Before a short race, you might take one like an espresso. In a longer race, save it for the final stretch, about forty minutes to an hour before the finish. But I always think of caffeine as spurring a horse. This time, the horse is you. If it still has energy but is flagging, a nudge might get it moving. If it's about to collapse, spurring it on is hardly kind.

Things that didn't work

Not everything goes my way. I'm not Batman, and I can't arrange the world to suit me. At least that keeps things real.

I haven't managed to make my wife and children fall in love with running. They were the first people to receive a draft of this book. I was really hoping for encouragement, and I got it, so I'm pleased. They didn't read the book.

We have a Porcelaine hound called Delalande. A hound ought to be the ideal running partner, surely. When he was a puppy, we covered 3 or 4 km together. He put up with it, but clearly didn't enjoy my approach. I wanted a steady pace. He wanted to zigzag, stop abruptly, and sprint off again. We had different ideas about running. Perhaps a trainer could have helped me teach him to run steadily. I never pursued it. Another small failure.

Like many beginners who have completed a marathon, I loved offering advice to friends. Whether it was good advice is hard to say, because they didn't follow it. That's part of why I wanted this book to be an account rather than a manual. I read about something, try it, and tell you what happened. I don't feel qualified to set myself up as an authority.

I didn't break three hours in the marathon during that running year. I'm busy coming up with reasons why that's not so bad. I'll make my peace with it eventually.

The running missionary

Running can be lonely. Unless you're in a club, you're often out there on your own. Then another runner comes toward you. A raised

hand, a smile. Funny how much you can say without saying anything.

At a race I meet hundreds or thousands of people who understand something about this. Focused and determined, looking great without fancy clothes, makeup, or an expensive car in sight. Young people full of energy, tough older runners still testing themselves. Good for them.

Out on the street, I keep seeing people who could do with taking better care of themselves. Extra pounds, extra chins, barely lifting their feet. They sit in offices and cafés, walk 3,000 to 5,000 steps a day, and think: everyone around me looks like this. It's normal.

I want to shake them and say: move. Move more! We've built a sedentary civilization full of sweets and calorie-heavy food. Look honestly at what it's doing to us. Don't let it flatten you. Get back to moving as humans were meant to move. Shed the excess. Move, move, for heaven's sake, move more!

I suspect many runners know that urgent, slightly helpless feeling. Perhaps it explains why enthusiasts insist on telling everyone about running. It isn't always vanity. Sometimes it's missionary zeal. Once something has changed your life, you want to share it, to persuade one more person to come along for a couple of kilometers. Perhaps this time the spark will catch.

That's probably why I wanted to write so much about running. Haruki Murakami has already drawn many people into it. Those of us who love it can at least try to pass it on.



December

“Many, many small victories. Small, yes. But every day.”

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An antidote to procrastination

In December I spoke at a conference called Important, Not Urgent. Friends and colleagues discussed ambitious goals, taking the first step, sticking with a plan, and enjoying life along the way. It was a good conversation. Plenty of people seemed to learn something about themselves.

The organizers asked me to talk about daily running in a session on sticking with things. It wasn't exactly a business strategy, but the organizers asked, and I told the story of my running year.

Listening to the other talks, I kept noticing how often procrastination came up. People wanted habits that would make them more effective, yet moved the same important tasks from one year's list to the next. Getting up early, finishing a dissertation or book, changing a habit: starting was hard, and keeping going seemed harder still.

After the conference, I thought: the 365 Challenge is brilliant training for beating procrastination. I can hardly imagine a better way to get rid of it. Once you've run for 180 or 300 days, complaints like "I can't make myself get up in the morning," "I can't lose weight," or "I can't find time to read" sound almost funny. You honestly can't see the problem anymore. Just do what needs doing.

The world seems full of perfectionist procrastinators. Better to do nothing than do it badly, they say. So they prepare to do everything brilliantly while doing nothing at all. Pointless perfectionism. Better to get something done, even clumsily. Regular running teaches you that. An imperfect workout beats a missed one. You learn to act instead of endlessly planning and putting things off.

After a year of running, procrastination is just a memory...

Wise advice I couldn't use

The end of the year is a time to look back and make plans.

I read running articles all the time and followed plenty of blogs. Eventually I noticed a catch. To write about running with any authority, you need experience. By the time you've got that experience, you've forgotten what it's like to be a beginner. So the people who know the most can be the hardest for a beginner to understand.

Someone who runs a 2:45 or 2:30 marathon, or faster, knows a thing or two about training. Their methods may be excellent. For a person who has never run 10 km, however, the explanation can feel like a survival guide to the moon. Correct, perhaps, but difficult to understand and impossible to apply yet.

Take the recommendation to schedule one or two rest days a week. That's right and important when you're running 80 to 120 km a week or more. Serious enthusiasts and professionals need the rest. But at 20 to 25 km a week, I think a rest day just breaks the rhythm. Your body already has time to recover, so an empty day adds nothing. Short workouts every other day don't even give it a chance to get tired: it adapts to the light workload and stops improving.

I'd read about running a negative split in a marathon. Absolutely right, when you can run a marathon faster than 5:30 per kilometer. But if you lack basic endurance, being told to push harder after 21 km sounds like dark humor. Almost mockery. Knowing about negative splits won't help when you've burned through your carbohydrate stores, hit the wall, and can barely run at all. How are you supposed to speed up? It took me four marathons to get even a shaky grip on pacing. Slow learner. Some lessons you have to learn with your feet.

Or take the golden rule of easy long runs. As a beginner, simply covering 10 km could be an all-out effort. My pulse was high, I did it infrequently, and progress was hard to see. Without understanding how to bridge that gap, it was easy to conclude that running wasn't working and give up.

By the end of the year, I understood my body very differently. Looking through old Nike, Garmin, and Strava records can make my hair stand on end. Given my pace and volume during that first challenge, how did I ever break four hours? It now looks like a small miracle.

With more experience, I could look back and make better sense of it. Then I could plan the next season and discuss those plans with the people closest to me.

Partners

If you share your life with someone, their feelings about running can make a big difference to yours. Support helps enormously. Arguments about all the time away, the endless running talk, and trips to races make things harder.

There's a joke that if a runner is still married, they're not training enough. Too far, I think. In that case, I'm happy to train too little.

My wife, Natalie, once wanted me to lose some weight. I promised I would, and at first she encouraged me. Then enthusiasm took over, and we began a series of tactical negotiations. Training affected the family schedule. Breakfast and dinner shifted around the run.

Eventually she softened. Seeing the changes in my body, she accepted the workouts as part of life. A person ought to have a hobby, and running was hardly the worst hobby I could have picked.

I tried to bring her fully into the running community, without much success. She runs a little and likes the health stats on her watch. Running together is difficult because our paces are so different. We can go out at roughly the same time, but follow different routes and cover different distances. Sharing our discoveries and achievements afterward works beautifully. That brings us closer.

She puts up with the shelf of running clothes, shoes that cost as much as a phone, and a drawer full of vitamins. I'm grateful. I really do think I'm lucky.

If I had to make the case for running at home, here's what I'd say:

- Exercise deserves a place in our lives. Running is at least as reasonable as a gym membership and doesn't have to take more time.
- Runners who train regularly get sick less often.
- I keep discovering places we can visit together later.
- I prefer the shape running gives me to the shape I got from watching TV.
- Less money and attention go toward drinking, smoking, and other unhelpful habits.
- Your partner gets to be proud of your running achievements too.
- There's always, always something to talk about.

Nietzsche had a wonderful idea: the purpose of marriage is conversation. Not children, a shared household, sex, happiness, care, or accumulating property. Conversation. I like that distinction. Make caring for each other the central purpose and you risk slipping into a parent-and-child relationship. Conversation means exchanging ideas and knowledge, learning to compromise, and growing as two people.

Running keeps that conversation going. It gives us one more subject we never seem to exhaust.

Natalie is watching me write this chapter about her. Later we'll probably discuss all of it: running, books, future trips, and what this year has brought us.

One percent better

Things changed for British cycling when Dave Brailsford took charge. He wasn't famous as a champion rider, but became famous for his approach to performance. The story starts with a team that had won little and struggled for prestige. Some sponsors were supposedly reluctant even to be associated with it.

Brailsford came up with a brilliant idea and put it into practice: marginal gains, small improvements that add up. His principle was simple: improve every aspect of cycling by 1%, and those tiny gains will combine into a substantial improvement.

They looked at every detail: food, daily routines, mattresses, tire weight, saddle shape, massage products. Little problems they'd always put up with became chances to improve. Movements, habits, equipment: look closely, make something a little better, repeat.

The results went well beyond the national team. Bradley Wiggins, riding for Team Sky, became the first British winner of the Tour de France, cycling's most prestigious race. Brailsford led that team too. The first British winner. Ever.

You and I probably won't be entering the Tour de France anytime soon. The idea is still useful.

Unfortunately, it works the other way too. Small problems add up. A faulty bolt, a sloppy weld, a temperature reading a few degrees off:

put enough of them together and you've got a rocket that fails, a car that breaks down, or a dead phone. The mistakes start making each other worse.

A burger and fries instead of a salad. Skipping a workout for an evening with a beer. Do it once and your life won't change. Keep doing it for years, and those small choices add up to a big difference.

Losing 20 kg or running a marathon isn't one magical event on one glorious day. It's all the little efforts you made along the way, adding up. Shoes, sleep, varied training: it all matters.

Start getting into running and the sheer volume of advice makes your head spin. Every runner, me included, thinks they're an expert and is ready to help. Websites, blogs, coaches: advice everywhere. Which tips work? Hard to say, but I think almost all of them do. I've read a lot and tried plenty. Most of the advice is either obvious or very useful.

Imagine that: the advice works if you follow it! There's just so much of it that nobody listens.

Yes, you need good shoes, good technique, healthy food, varied workouts, changes in training load, breathing, gear, and more. So many things to work on that you don't know where to begin. You want to tackle the important stuff first and leave the rest for later. You need priorities. So what matters most?

All of it! You don't have to perfect one thing before moving on to the next. Perfection is impossible, so improve everything a little, even by 1%, and keep going. What matters is making those small improvements regularly. They'll add up, and the results will follow.

Perhaps that's why the 365 Challenge appealed to me so much. Regular exercise. Small daily improvements. Lots and lots of little victories. Little, yes. But every day. That's what leads to enormous personal change.

Read running books in that spirit, too. Keep looking for ideas that can help you improve.

Listen to all the running advice, or nearly all of it, and try things for yourself. If something gives you even a 1% improvement, it's worth having. Over time, the results can be extraordinary. Or at least, they'll mean a lot to you.



A new year

“Running is a goal in itself.”

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What next?

For the year ahead, I plan to ease off in January and February, bringing the weekly total down to about 30 to 50 km for a while. In March and April, I'd like to build toward 100 to 120 km and aim for a sub-three-hour marathon in Kingsford in May. Perhaps I'll even get to run the Pyongyang Marathon. That would be an unusual experience.

Come summer, I'd like to try Kipchoge's kind of training volume for a little while, just to see what that world feels like. Not his pace, obviously, but perhaps the distance. I won't know where my limits are until I explore them. It might do nothing for me, or it might be too much. Either way, I'm curious enough to want to find out.

I hope to run one of the Majors. My times seem to be approaching the relevant standards, but there are many hopeful runners, and getting in may still depend on a lottery or other entry requirements. Berlin is the one I keep picturing. If that doesn't happen, I'll choose a few beautiful races elsewhere in Europe or Asia.

I dream of a running camp in Iten, Kenya. I've been to Kenya and don't picture a luxury vacation. I liked the country very much, though, and there's something almost magical about the thought of running where the champions train.

I also hope to get my children and a few more friends into running.

To finish

I won't end by telling you that anything is possible if you believe in yourself. It isn't. Work hard, make good choices, and you can improve. But we all have limits.

Age, sex, surroundings, coaching, temperament, upbringing, and countless strokes of luck all play a part. Some things can change; others cannot. Champions often begin with unusual gifts, then meet circumstances that bring those gifts into sport. Hard work matters enormously, but we don't all start from the same place.

And that's fine. This book isn't for champions. It's for people who love adventures.

Running is a wonderful adventure. It lets me explore the world and find out what I'm made of. Feeling fully alive matters more than another personal best. New friendships matter more than another medal on the wall. And reaching a goal feels good all by itself. Thoreau wrote in *Walden*, "I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately." I get that. My version happens to involve running shoes.

At the end of another running year, I'll record another video saying I ran every day. I'll dream of new marathons, new workouts, and new places to see on foot. I'll listen to my body, to new books, to new music. I'll admire all those runners faster than me and gently tease the ones who are slower. Yes, there are a few. Running has become a goal in itself. I hope there are many more runatic years ahead.

THE END



After the book

P.S. After the book

A note on health and responsibility

The running bucket list

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P.S. After the book

A note on health and responsibility

This book isn't a reference manual or a training guide, especially when it comes to health and medicine. It's a collection of memories, thoughts, theories, and my own understanding of things I've read and often tried. I'm not a certified coach or a medical professional. I don't claim to be an expert, and I have no plans to become a coach.

I simply like seeing people run, and I like writing books. I've tried to share what happened to me rather than tell you what to do. Please read it in that spirit. For advice about your own training or health, turn to a qualified coach, a running group with professional guidance, or a clinician who knows you and your circumstances.

More than anything, I want people to read this book and do something with it: go for a run, discover something, maybe even discover a different version of themselves. If you share a post or send the book to a friend, I'll be grateful. The more runners, the better.

People around the world use #run365challenge to find each other. It's good to know there are others with the same strange obsession.

When the draft was ready, I sent it to friends. Soon the messages started arriving: "Damn you! You got me running. I've done it every day for a week!" There were photos from treadmills and parks, route maps, and celebrations of a first 10K. Those messages made me happy. This was why I'd written the book: someone had started a running year of their own.

If you didn't enjoy it, I'm sorry. I tried, and I'll keep trying to make it better: correcting mistakes, adding chapters. A digital book leaves room for another draft.

Pass the book along. If you want to support it, a donation will help me keep working on it.

This book was hard to write. A book takes hours every day, for weeks or months. I wrote my earlier books at night, borrowing time from sleep. Running put an end to that. Without enough rest, my body would go on strike. So I asked my family to bear with me, gave up chess and work parties for a while, and put other things on hold. Outside work, my main project was the book. And the running, of course.

I hope I haven't gone on too long. I didn't want to pad this out into something that takes weeks to get through. I wanted a book built like a runner: lean, with no extra weight. I hope that's how it reads.

Money and donations

I once watched an interview with Steve Jobs in which he made a point that stayed with me. As I remember it, he disliked selling to corporate purchasing committees, where internal politics could matter more than the product. Selling directly to people felt more honest: here is the product, and you decide whether it deserves your money.

Publishing a book can feel a little like selling to a committee. First you convince an editor. Then the book goes into print and through the distribution channels. Only then does it meet its readers. If you and the editor don't agree, that meeting never happens.

I wanted as many people as possible to read this book, rather than a few thousand willing to take a chance on a description and a nice

cover. If they enjoyed it, they'd recommend it. If they didn't, they'd regret spending the money.

So I decided to try it the other way around. Read the book for free. If you like it, you can pay afterward by making a donation.

There is another advantage. You've probably seen reviews saying, "I wish I could get my money back." If you don't like this book, you can't get your money back either. You haven't paid anything. Seems fair.

If you enjoyed it, you can help the project grow. Visit the support page or donate through Tribute.

How much?

It's up to you, within the options on the payment page. Think of it as a tip, a thank-you, or a little "well done."

You might give what you'd spend on a book, a training session, or a month's membership. You might mark losing 10 kg or finally doing something you've dreamed of. What is that worth to you?

You decide. And if you read it for free and go out running, I'll be happy with that too.

Where will the money go?

- Paying the taxes due on donations.
- Working with an editor to make the book better.
- Recording an audiobook for listening on a run or in the car.
- Maintaining and improving the website, where readers can leave reviews and share their stories.

- Bringing the book to more readers in more languages.
- If support allows, adding chapters and releasing new editions free of charge, ready to share with friends.

Thank you, and good luck! This is your chance to vote for the book. I'd love to know what it meant to you.

The running bucket list

A bucket list can look like a collection of clichés: write a book, run a marathon, dance in the rain, fall in love, start a business, watch the sun rise over the ocean. I don't think the idea is silly. Most of us carry some version of it around without writing it down. A written list turns vague wishes into the start of a plan. A dream can drift away. A plan can fail, but it can also be carried out. Writing the list is a first step.

I once tried making my own list of a hundred things. The first entries came easily. Around number thirty I realized I didn't want a shopping list or a travel catalog. Coming up with a hundred things you actually care about takes thought. Do I actually want this? Does it matter to me?

A few years earlier, I'd finished a list and started working through it. I had already run a marathon, started a business, started a family, had children, and written books, so some of the usual big ones were already checked off. Others took more thought. The list finally brought a dog into my life, after years of postponing it. It took me up Kilimanjaro, eight years after I first meant to go, and then to Zanzibar, ordering beer in Swahili. During my running year, it took me to Mounttoun, where I ran in the hills to prepare for the climbs in an upcoming marathon. It even got me making potato pancakes from scratch. Later than planned, perhaps. But I did it. I really did.

You don't need a list for your whole life. Start with a running bucket list: a few ambitions, a few adventures, things that make you want to lace up.

A few possibilities:

1. Run your first 10K.
2. Make your first running playlist.
3. Run through an empty city at five or six in the morning.
4. Run beside a river.
5. Run with a friend.
6. Visit a running club.
7. Get your first running gadget.
8. Run along a waterfront.
9. Log your first 100 km.
10. Train three times in a week.
11. Buy your first dedicated running shoes.
12. Come out as a runner: your first running post on Instagram.
13. Run your first 100 km month.
14. Run twice in one day.
15. Earn your first finisher's medal.
16. Finish your first half marathon.
17. Go for a good run in the rain.
18. Run seven days in a row.
19. Hear someone ask, "How do you find time for all this?"
20. Log your first 1,000 km.

21. Enter your first night race.
22. Finish a training run longer than 25 km.
23. Run your first 200 km month.
24. Run with a dog.
25. Follow a running blog.
26. Inspire someone to start running.
27. Finish a marathon. Yes, you're a marathoner now.
28. Run to the ocean or along a beach.
29. Run to a world-famous landmark.
30. Break two hours in a half marathon.
31. Break four hours in a marathon.
32. Get your first running tattoo.
33. Catch yourself giving a beginner running advice.
34. Run your first 300 km month.
35. Complete a running year: the 365 Challenge.
36. Travel to another city for a race.
37. Race in another country.
38. Run your first 80 km week.
39. Run your first 100 km week.
40. Lose a noticeable amount of weight.
41. Say goodbye to your first worn-out running shoes.
42. Have your first laboratory exercise test.
43. Run between two continents.

44. Meet a running celebrity.
45. Record a qualifying time for a Major.
46. Run a Major.
47. Break three hours in a marathon.
48. Try an ultramarathon.
49. Try a triathlon, perhaps even an Ironman.
50. Break two hours for the marathon distance. One guy has managed it.

Runatics

Motorcyclists and rock fans get tattoos when the feeling is too big to keep inside. Runners do it too. After my first marathon, I had a little wing like Hermes' tattooed on my right ankle, beside the number 42.2. A reminder to stay light on my feet. Now the left ankle has a matching wing and 21.1, for balance. Friends have tattoos marking their most memorable marathons. I like that. A declaration of lasting love.

The internet loves lists such as "You have lived in China too long if..." or "Ten signs you work in IT."

Here are twenty-one signs that running has taken over. You may be a runatic if:

1. "An easy 10K" sounds perfectly reasonable.
2. You have at least one running tattoo.
3. Your partner knows who Eliud Kipchoge is.
4. You know exactly what happens when a toenail comes off.

5. You panic when there really is no time for today's run.
6. You're often the person with the deepest tan in the room.
7. You could fill a gallery with photos of your feet in running shoes.
8. Arriving somewhere new, you automatically start planning a route.
9. As you get older, you find it harder to join in when friends your age start comparing their health problems.
10. Calling an online challenge a "marathon" makes you wince.
11. You've stood in an unbelievably long line for a portable toilet.
12. From a car, you automatically spot runners and feel a little jealous.

13. You catch yourself offering the same answer to every problem:
perhaps a run would help.
14. You wear a sports watch everywhere and feel no need to
apologize.
15. You understand "a half in the green zone at 4:30 per kilometer,"
and why it's impressive.
16. If there's one other runner at a party, you have plenty to discuss.
17. Perfect weather means 10°C and a little cloud.
18. After a run, you can't quite say whether it's cold or hot outside.
19. You know your resting heart rate for the past week.
20. You have strange pre-race rituals.
21. The first thing you do in the morning is to check your pulse.

SUPPORT THE PROJECT

Pass the baton.

One run can change a day. A year of running can change a life. A story about it might help someone take their first step.

This book grew from a simple decision: go for a run, then keep going. Now it is open to everyone. If you found encouragement here, recognized yourself, or felt like giving it a try, help this story run a little farther.

KEEP THE STORY RUNNING

Share the book with a friend, or support it through Tribute. Scan the QR code or use the link below. Your contribution helps me keep the digital edition free.



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Good stories keep going.

Sometimes it starts with a message to a friend:
“Read this. I think it might be your kind of thing.”

Share the book with someone who has been meaning to start, is returning after a break, or simply loves running. Your link could be the beginning of someone else’s running year.

Thank you for reading, running, and passing the baton on.

SHARE THE BOOK

runningyearbook.com

Write to the author: shumovich@gmail.com



ALEX SHUMOVICH

“I hope there are many
more runatic years
ahead.”

Every day adds to the line.

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AM I A RUNATIC?