Plan: a faster marathon

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Advanced: for runners who have finished a marathon.

Train for 18 weeks with five runs a week: two easy runs, one interval session, one threshold or goal-pace session and a long run that builds to 3 hours with long goal-pace finishes. Every fourth week is easier, and the last three weeks are a taper (a planned cut in training before race day so you start fresh).

Why it matters: A faster marathon depends on aerobic fitness, threshold, economy and fueling, all built over months. Mostly easy running with targeted hard sessions is how experienced runners get there (see "Training intensity distribution").

Who it suits

- Runners who have finished a marathon, run five days a week, and have a recent long run of at least 90 minutes.
- You know your threshold heart rate or pace, or are willing to test it (see "Thresholds and training zones").
- **Check with your doctor** if you have a heart condition or other health concern.

What it costs

Item	Commitment
Running	5 sessions a week, 30 minutes to 3 hours
Strength	2 sessions a week, about 40 to 45 minutes; 1 during the taper
Total time	About 8 to 8½ hours a week at the peak, including strength
Difficulty	Advanced

Set your goal pace

- **Use a recent half marathon.** A common formula (Riegel's) predicts marathon time as about 2.1 times your half marathon time. A 1:50 half suggests about 3:50.
- **Be cautious:** many runners finish the marathon slower than the prediction. If in doubt, aim a few minutes slower and finish strong.
- **Test it** in the long runs with goal-pace finishes, and adjust after weeks 9 and 13.

How the sessions work

- **Easy:** zone 1, the easiest effort: you can talk in full sentences.
- **Intervals:** after 10 minutes easy, hard repeats with equal easy recovery, then 10 minutes easy. See "Designing intervals."
- **Threshold:** zone 2, "comfortably hard": about the fastest pace you could hold for an hour.
- **Goal pace:** your planned marathon pace, usually a bit slower than threshold.
- **Threshold and goal-pace repeats:** after 10 minutes easy, with 2 minutes easy between repeats, then 10 minutes easy.
- **Strides:** 4 to 6 short bursts of about 20 seconds at a quick, relaxed pace near the end of an easy run. Faster than your race pace, but not an all-out sprint, with full recovery between.
- **Long run:** easy, with goal-pace finishes where shown.
- **Sample week:** Monday easy, Tuesday intervals, Wednesday easy, Thursday threshold or goal pace, Saturday or Sunday long run; strength after two easy runs.

The 18-week plan

All times in minutes, including warm-up and cool-down.

Week	Easy	Intervals	Easy	Threshold or goal pace	Long run
1	45	5 × 3 min (47)	40	2 × 10 min threshold (42)	90
2	45	6 × 3 min (53)	45	3 × 8 min threshold (48)	99
3	50	5 × 4 min (56)	45	2 × 12 min threshold (46)	108
4 (easier)	40	4 × 3 min (41)	35	35 easy with strides	90
5	50	6 × 4 min (64)	45	3 × 10 min threshold (54)	118
6	50	2 sets of 10 × 30 s (45)	50	2 × 15 min threshold (52)	128
7	55	5 × 5 min (65)	50	25 min at threshold (45)	138, last 20 at goal pace
8 (easier)	45	4 × 3 min (41)	40	40 easy with strides	110
9	55	6 × 4 min (64)	50	2 × 20 min goal pace (62)	150
10	55	5 × 5 min (65)	50	3 × 10 min threshold (54)	160, last 30 at goal pace
11	55	6 × 4 min (64)	50	3 × 15 min goal pace (69)	170
12 (easier)	45	4 × 3 min (41)	40	45 easy with strides	135
13	55	5 × 5 min (65)	50	2 × 20 min goal pace (62)	180, last 45 at goal pace
14 (peak)	55	5 × 5 min (65)	50	30 min at threshold (50)	180, last 60 at goal pace
15	55	6 × 4 min (64)	50	2 × 25 min goal pace (72)	165
16 (taper)	45	5 × 3 min (47)	40	2 × 15 min goal pace (52)	140
17 (taper)	40	4 × 3 min (41)	35	2 × 10 min goal pace (42)	90

Week	Easy	Intervals	Easy	Threshold or goal pace	Long run
18 (race week)	45	40 easy with 3 × 5 min goal pace	30	25 easy, two days before	Race

Check your progress: each long run stays within about 10% of your longest in the past month (see "Running injuries"). Weeks 16 to 18 drop to about 80%, 60% and a third of week 14, not counting the race (see "Tapering before a race").

Too much? Drop an easy run, or swap an interval session for an easy run. Missing a week is fine; repeat the last week you completed.

Strength, twice a week

Heavy lifting makes runners more efficient, and adding jumps helps most (see "Strength training for endurance athletes"). Strength work also lowers injury risk (see "Running injuries"). Plan my workouts puts these sessions on your strength days.

Weeks	How often	What to do
1 to 4 (learn the lifts)	Twice a week	Squat jumps first, landing in place: 3 × 5. Leg press and dumbbell Romanian deadlift: 2 × 10 to 12. Barbell split squat, light: 2 × 8 to 10 on each leg. Lat pull-down and dumbbell bench press: 2 × 10 to 12. Single-leg calf raise: 2 × 10 to 12 on each leg. Suitcase carry: 2 × 30 to 45 seconds on each side. Use weights you could lift a few more times.
5 to 15 (heavy)	Twice a week	Jumps first, with full rest: box jumps 3 × 5 in weeks 5 to 10, then broad jumps 3 × 5 and single-leg hop and stick 2 × 4 on each leg in weeks 11 to 15. Leg press and barbell Romanian deadlift: 3 × 4 to 6, heavy, with a rep or two to spare. Barbell split squat: 2 × 6 to 8 on each leg. Lat pull-down and dumbbell bench press: 3 × 6 to 8. Single-leg calf raise: 3 × 8 to 12 on each leg. Suitcase carry: 2 × 30 to 45 seconds on each side, heavier over time.
16 and 17 (taper)	Once a week	Leg press and Romanian deadlift: 2 × 4 to 6 at the same weight. Lat pull-down and dumbbell bench press: 2 × 6 to 8. Single-leg calf raise: 2 × 8 to 12 on each leg. Leave out the jumps.
18 (race week)	None	Rest from strength.

- **Put heavy leg days** two or more days before the long run and away from hard sessions where you can.
- **Squat instead of the leg press** once you know the lift (see "Learning a new lift").

- **Jumps follow** the beginner progression in "Plyometrics: jumps and throws": land quietly, and move on only when landings are controlled.
- **Upper body too:** a pull and a push each session keep your whole body strong, as "How much exercise is enough?" recommends.

Fueling and race day

- **Every long run over about 75 minutes:** practice 60 to 90 grams of carbohydrate an hour if your stomach allows, using glucose-fructose products (see "Fueling for endurance events").
- **Carb load for two days** (eat more carbohydrate than usual; see "Race week and race-morning eating").
- **Pace evenly:** run the first half at or slightly slower than goal pace.
- **Drink to thirst,** and never finish long runs heavier than you started (see "Hydration, sodium and race day").
- **Hot race?** Prepare with heat sessions (see "Heat and altitude").

Related guides

- Plan: your first marathon
- Race week and race-morning eating

Related articles

- Training intensity distribution
- Thresholds and training zones
- Designing intervals
- Running economy
- Monitoring training load
- Heat and altitude