RUNNER'S WORLD

Women's Running: Training

Pace Yourself

The best place to work on your intuitive pace clock is the track.

By Jeff Galloway

How many times have you heard runners say after a race, "I went out too fast"? I've heard it a lot--because it happens a lot. I'd be willing to bet it's the most common mistake made in racing.

But you don't have to make it. If you train properly, you'll soon know which race pace is right for you. And your improved sense of pace will carry over from your races to your regular training runs.

With pacing practice, you can also learn to run the second half of your races faster than the first. This is called running "negative splits." Most of the marathoners I've worked with over the years have run their personal bests with negative splits.

Why run an even or negative-split pace? For several reasons. One, it gives your muscles and tendons time to warm up and stretch out. Once this happens, you can maintain the same pace with less effort or increase the pace without expending more effort.

A second big reason not to be overeager at the beginning: A fast start increases your body temperature more quickly, which speeds up your sweat rate, thereby depriving you of much needed body fluids. As research has shown, even mild dehydration will significantly hamper your performance.

Lastly, an overambitious start will make you pay in the end. What could (and should) have been an enjoyable run ends up as drudgery. Thus, the all-too-frequent finisher's lament: "I went out too fast."

Perfecting your pace

I believe each of us has our own intuitive pace clock. But to keep it "running on time," you need to do some regular pacing drills. The best place to do this is on a track or on an accurately measured trail or road.

Before your pacing session, jog easily for a mile or so. Then do a series of 400-meter repeats at your current race pace. Which race, you ask? That's up to you. If you do mostly 5-Ks, use 5-K pace. If you do 10-Ks, pick 10-K pace. Do three or four repeats the first time out, with an easy 400-meter walk or jog between them. Do this pacing session once a week, each time increasing your repeats by one until you reach 10 per session. Now, here's the key to each session. On your first two 400s, check your watch at 200 meters to see that you're on the right pace. Thereafter, don't look at the watch until you're at the end of the 400. Simply try your best to stay within 2 seconds of your target time. Doing this without the watch forces you to rely on your internal clock. This once-a-week pacing session will do more than teach you pace. The up-tempo nature of it will make you a stronger and more efficient runner. You'll learn to run with your chest and head up, eyes looking forward, arms pumping and feet stepping lightly. You'll also learn how to conserve energy reserves while running--how to use them sparingly and efficiently.

Periodic upkeep

Once you work up to 10 400s during a single pacing session, you'll have a much better sense of race pace. At this point, it's possible to maintain your pace judgment by doing just a few 400s once or twice a week. (Of course, many of you may want to continue doing more, which is fine.)

Before beginning your pace-maintenance workout, warm up with an easy mile or two. Then do a few 100-meter accelerations (also called strides or gliders) at 80 percent of maximum speed. Now you're ready for the 400s. Three or four will do, with an easy 400-meter jog after each. Again, don't look at your watch until after you complete each hard 400. Going negative

Running an even pace is definitely the way to go. But running negative splits often works even better. You can make this happen by going out slightly slower than race pace for the first, say, 20 to 50 percent of the race.

Let me give you two concrete examples of how this works--one for the 5-K and one for the marathon. If you're figuring to run your 5-K at 8-minute-mile pace, try to go through the first mile in around 8:10 (i.e., slightly slower than race pace). For mile 2, aim squarely at 8 minutes per mile. For the last mile-plus (especially the last half-mile), go hard. Now for the marathon. Let's say

you're planning on 10-minute miles for the race. For the first 3 to 5 miles, go a little slower than this--maybe 15 seconds per mile slower. This will give you plenty of time to get into the groove of this long race. Between miles 5 and 20, cruise at your goal pace of 10-minute miles. For the last 6 miles, pick up the pace and finish strong.

Making adjustments

A quick word on hilly courses and windy days. You need to adjust your pace accordingly for both of these conditions. The key is to maintain the same level of effort throughout the race. If you do this, you'll naturally be going slower than goal pace on the uphills (or into the wind) and faster than goal pace on the downhills (with the wind). Note: To help you gauge effort on the uphills, use your breathing as a guide. If you're huffing and puffing, slow down until breathing normalizes.

The big picture

As I mentioned, developing a better sense of pace will help you conserve energy while running. But it can do more than that. Your ability to find an even pace can carry over into other parts of your life, enabling you to "pace" yourself through tough weeks at work, stressful personal problems, all sorts of challenges. You can accomplish many things--if you pace yourself correctly.

EASE INTO IT

You're probably going out too fast in races or training runs if . . .

* You notice that you're breathing heavily in the early miles.
* You experience extreme fatigue after reaching a certain training distance--and can't go any farther.
* Your pace slows during the final miles.
* It takes more than three days to recover from a 5-K race.
* Your legs feel tired most of the time.