

High pressure performance

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The following is aimed at middle and long distance running, but many of the principles apply to other events.

There is no substitute for physical training to develop and maintain cardio-vascular fitness and speed, but that is not all that is needed. Before the starting gun goes, you need to have thought about the race strategy that is likely to produce the best results for you, a ‘game plan’ that maximises your strengths and minimises those of your opponents (if you know them). This should not be inflexible as you may have to change it as the race unfolds and other options provide you with a better chance of a good result (your opponents may not act according to your script!). If you have a strong finish, you may be able to afford to sit on someone and leave it to the last lap or so to surge past the opposition. If, on the other hand, your chief competitors have a better kick than you, you will have to put some distance on them before the race gets to the sharp end. You may have to make a judgement on whether a person who goes out fast is a “rabbit” or can last out the distance. There is little point in worrying about what the rest of the field might do, but there is merit in having thought out before the race what options you can choose to employ based on what you know you can do.

It is essential that you warm up well before the race, something that becomes more critical with age. The trick is to warm up without wearing out. A typical warm up (finishing around 15 minutes before the start of the race) could include:

- 10 minutes of slow running
 - a couple of 60-80m run throughs, accelerating up to around 90% of maximum speed
 - 2 or 3 dynamic warm up exercises - high knee lifts, high back kicks, etc
 - another two 50 - 60m run throughs, this time up to 95% maximum speed
- After that, slow jog or walk if possible until called to the start. There is nothing magic about the above, you may develop a different routine that suits you.

Research indicates that static stretching before a race has little positive effect on performance, but may be of some value after the race. Dynamic exercises that take muscles through a larger range than will be experienced during the race, done with limb speeds comparable to that required in the race are of greater benefit and tend to “prime” the body for the action to come. They also help to focus the mind on the task to come in the hour or so before the race.

When the race gets underway, after the adrenaline rush of the start, monitor what your body is doing. If you detect things like hunched shoulders and clasped fists or other muscle tenseness that does not contribute to running speed, relax those muscles. By thinking about running smoothly and fast you can improve your running efficiency. Running is not just about physical strength, but also how the brain controls muscle fibres to make maximum use of them. This monitoring has to be done regularly throughout the race, particularly as increasing fatigue impacts on running style.

All of the above should be incorporated into your training. As with a race, think about what you want out of training and use it to develop the physical and mental skills needed to race to the best of your ability. The body is remarkably specific in how it responds to challenges, hence the training you do should be directly related to the level and nature of performance you

want to achieve. Lots of long slow running will make you proficient at long slow running, whereas regular challenge of the anaerobic lactic system will help to develop that system.

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