

Andy Lin

How to Run a Marathon Faster than Everyone¹

Step 1: Sign up for a marathon

I had always wanted to run a marathon. The idea first took form when, during the 1995 New York City Marathon, I volunteered with the Red Cross and stood at the finish line, giving out water, hot chocolate, Mylar blankets, apples, Powerbars, and helped those who collapsed or whose legs and lungs no longer seemed to function normally, either by applying my own limited knowledge of first aid or by seeking medical help.

It was a tough year: it was freezing that day in November, and I was feeling incredibly cold even while wearing a heavy coat. Icy rain² blustered onto my hooded head at some thirty miles an hour. I later found out that they were the worst conditions ever for a New York City Marathon. Runners came through the finish line wearing but shorts and a tee, enveloped in sweat and their bodies engulfed in steam. As they slowed or stopped, some retched and vomited, and all were in danger of hypothermia as their body temperatures dropped. Precipitation pierced their vaporous halos.

I remember one man who, two steps after crossing the finish, fell to the ground in a heap and wrenched and wriggled uncontrollably, unable to keep control of his own muscles, his mind wandering off and back. Someone had given him his medal, and when a stretcher was carrying him off, he clutched that medal like it was the only thing in the world that mattered.

¹ Another title I considered was *I am a Control Freak*

² For ten years, I refused to own an umbrella because I did not want to feel at the mercy of rain. My mother thought I was being silly, but then she's thought many of the things I've done silly.

Most of the time, however, the finishers just needed someone to walk with them the quarter-mile back to their belongings, someone they could talk to, intelligibly or not, so that they knew people were still with them after their ordeal. Many runners were from abroad, and though their knowledge of English was minimal, like everyone else, they still spoke eagerly and enthusiastically, if not with the full force of their lungs behind them, as though to make up for the hours of silence before. I watched their faces as they spoke, and realized it was tears, not rain, that made their faces gleam.

My dreams of running a marathon remained inchoate, nearly forgotten, until I learned that Kenneth, a friend of mine from high school, had run it in 1998. During Christmas break that year, over a dinner³ get-together with a group of high school friends, he told me of his experience, and I convinced him to run it again in 1999 on the condition that I would join him. When registration came around that spring, both of us sent in our applications and \$70 registration fees the very first week to ensure a spot. We also both entered the same expected finish time so that we would start the race at the same place: more than 30,000 people would sign up for the race, and the participants are lined up in the order they are expected to finish. Four hours didn't seem *too* unreasonable.

A month later, the New York Road Runners Club sent me a packet confirming my registration for the thirtieth running of the New York City Marathon and I was on my way.

Step 2: Train. (take one)

³ I was a vegetarian between my freshman and sophomore years of college. I've never had any hang-ups with meat, morally, economically, or otherwise, but I simply wanted to see if I would be able to not eat meat for a while. My mom, again, thought I was being silly, especially since I was a big fan of meat, and she didn't think I'd last a month. Boy did I show her.

When I signed up for the marathon, I imagined pushing myself on the relentless hills of Ithaca, gaining appreciation for the scenery while working my quads, calves, respiratory⁴ and cardiovascular systems. Spring was in the air: rebirth, renewal, and rejuvenation were the words of the season. Resolve, unfortunately, was not. Starting today became starting tomorrow became starting the day after. Then I read an article in *Runner's World* about training for a marathon in four months and I realized I had nothing to worry about: the marathon wasn't until November so I was actually three months ahead of schedule.

Step 3: Train. (take two)

I realized early on that time⁵ was not on my side.

July came, and with a lone summer class my daily responsibility, time stretched before me, grew longer with the sun, burning the running trails a deep orange late in the evening. I wanted to run, I really did, but my timing was remarkably unfortunate: I was too full or too hungry, too sore or too vapid, too tired or too drunk. About a month later, I figured out through

⁴ I picked up smoking once: I smoked a pack a day for exactly one month solely to gain an addiction, learn how to blow smoke rings, and prove to myself I could quit afterward, which I promptly did. I decided against telling my mother about this. She probably would not have thought it was silly.

⁵ I've never been a big fan of time. Nabokov called himself a "chronophobic" who must "have all space and all time participate in my emotion, in my mortal love, so that the edge of its mortality is taken off, thus helping me to fight the utter degradation, ridicule, and horror in having developed an infinity of sensation and thought within a finite existence." This is not the case for me as I have a long ways yet to an infinity of sensation and thought. Rather, what bothers me is that in order to gain such sensation and thought, what is needed is an expenditure of time rather than expenditure of talent, all of which seems rather inevitable to me, whether it takes hours or days or years. I have little patience for time. Time, I figure, is an unavoidable waste of time. Or as my father likes to tell me: Andy, why're you so lazy?

exhaustive elimination that the only reasonable time to go for a run was between four and six in the afternoon. Unless of course it was raining, which, if I remember correctly, happened quite often.

By the time I figured all this out and was ready for a run, four was no longer feasible as it was now absurdly hot, and anything after ten in the morning and before seven in the evening would simply not work. Recognizing the problem for the impossible situation it was, I decided I would wait until September before I began my training. I had no choice⁶.

Step 4: Train. (take three)

September came with its hubris of flattering foliage and my friend Eric, who ran occasionally, became concerned about my ability to finish the marathon. He convinced me to sign up for a charity 5K with him and on an early Sunday morning at 7:00, we stood at the starting line with a ragtag of ragamuffins, runners, and other students, next to pumpkins, large, medium, and small, to be given to the winners. When the gun went off, I went off and didn't stop. Twenty-five minutes later, I finished out of breath, out of legs, and with a new respect for just how far a marathon was.

Five days later, after having sufficiently recovered from the 5K, Eric and I began my training. We ran for an hour, through and out to the farther reaches of campus, past the

⁶ What choices do we really have in life, though? I admit I am a bit of a fatalist. For all my attempts to assert my own will over my life, those bookends of life, birth and death, remain a mystery to me. Why was I born, why will I die, and what have I meant in between? As you pull from a microscopic to a macroscopic to a telescopic view, the answers become increasingly frustrating. On a molecular level, the answer is elementary. If you asked my parents, after a moment's thought they'd answer something else entirely. On a cosmic level, however, I fall entirely out of view.

plantations and the cows, which I saw for the first time. The initial burning in my legs subsided with time and I was convinced I could go on forever. It felt great, and I wondered why I hadn't started running earlier. Tomorrow, I thought, and everyday!

The next day, though, I could hardly move my legs, my feet were sore. And the day after that it rained, or I had a paper to write, or I ate too large a lunch. Before I knew it, after having run a grand total of three times, the marathon was a week away and every training guide I'd read said not to run a week before the actual race. This section of the training guide⁷ I followed to a tee.

Step 5: Run (or walk) to the finish.

Early Sunday morning November 7, at six, after having slept a scant four hours, I met up with Kenneth at a bus stop near Times Square where dozens of buses would take us and thousands of others to the start. The race didn't begin until eleven or so, and I couldn't understand why the organizers of the race had everyone out in the cold for so many hours beforehand, but the time passed quickly and I stretched and tried to keep warm best I could.

We lined up, all 32,000 of us, on the Staten Island side of the Verrazano Bridge. I could only tell that Kenneth and I were lined up somewhere in the middle: there were people as far ahead and as far behind as I could see. There was light chatter rippling through the crowd,

⁷ It bothers me that the minute we are born, we are being told what to do. "Ssssh!" the crying baby is told. Morals and principles are taught to us either through religion or Aesop. Every year, we are being told new foods to eat: less fat and less carbs, more antioxidants and more probiotics. Yet despite all this, every time I hear news about a man living to a hundred, it is someone who smoked a pack of cigarettes and ate a one pound steak everyday of his life. Self-help guides litter the bookstore walls and are perennial best sellers, but can we really trust a how-to guide to tell us how to live our lives? We spend all our time living learning how to live and I'm not sure I trust the advice.

everyone wearing old sweatshirts they would discard when the race got under way. A voice addressed us over a PA system telling us of the near perfect weather conditions, and then Mayor Giuliani told us how we were all already winners. Together with him we counted down to the start of the race. The chatter became a cheer as the gun went *bang!*

I would have sprinted out the gates in excitement but then I would have smacked into someone's back. Instead, Kenneth and I slowly walked forward, *pari passu* with those around us. As the faster runners ahead of us sped off, the traffic eased, and by the time I reached the starting line five minutes later, I was at a brisk jog. Kenneth had already run past me, and I strategized that it would be best to let him tire himself out early. I would not see him again the rest of the day.

While crossing the bridge, I felt the faint trickle of a drizzle, and I looked up at the sky to see if any clouds had slipped past the meteorologists. The sun shined brightly, and looking left, I noticed a lineup of people with their backs to me, peeing off the bridge. I'm not sure if I really needed to go, but not wanting to miss an opportunity that might never come again, I ran to an empty slot next to a squatting woman, and peed into the blue sea.

Relieved and back on course, I began running again. Beneath me, I felt the entire road throb to its own pulse, a curiously distinct amalgamation of all the runners on it. I ran to the beat of the bridge, and enjoyed the idea that everyone else on the bridge was synchronized as well. By the end of the bridge, into Brooklyn, a large sign that marked mile one stood high, and beneath it a digital clock displayed the official time: 13 minutes. Taking into account the five minutes it

took to get to the start, the first mile took me 8 minutes, and I was feeling great. At this rate⁸, I thought, another 25 miles should be no problem at all.

I pulled the sweatshirt I was wearing over my head and threw it off, proudly displaying my bib no. X8633. As we made a left turn off the bridge onto a large street, I saw ahead of me the largest mass of people I had ever seen, a steady trail of runners moving forward, and my adoring fans watching me five rows thick on either side. In fact, other than on the bridges, there would be a large swarm of people cheering me on the entire race. Some runners wrote their names on their shirts, and these runners received personal cheers: “Go Jessica!” or “Go Michael!” or “Go American Cancer Society!” I vowed to write my name on my shirt if I ever ran it again, but even without it, I received the occasional “Go X8633!” Heartened by this generous show of support, the second mile passed another eight minutes later, and I was still feeling pretty good.

I picked up some Gatorade at the tables and asked someone how far we would be on this road. “All the way past that large building down there,” he said pointing straight ahead, and I squinted to see the small dot to which he was referring. I nodded and plodded on forward, grateful to have something to run toward. The third and fourth miles passed without incident, but my pace slowed to about a 10-minute mile. My breathing and my legs were both getting heavier, and I began searching for ways to keep my mind off the fatigue. The large building was still a

⁸ Discounting relativity, we all bumble through life at the same rate, the same infinitesimal percentage of the aggregate cosmic whole. I find my father to be a great man: diligent, intelligent, loving, compassionate, and with a strong sense of moral values; in short, he is exactly the kind of person the how-to guides tell him he should be. Strictly in terms of time, my father’s sixty-three years easily dwarfs Mozart’s thirty-five, and there is the chance that he will contribute more than twice the life units (if such a thing existed) to the universal whole. Yet one can say with some confidence that Mozart’s life was the greater one. Or to put another way: in the context of history, Mozart wins by a long shot.

significant⁹ ways off, and I began trying to talk to everyone near me, wasting my breath by talking in normal cadence, denying to myself that my breathing was stumbling. This is a losing strategy and I would not recommend it. Another mile passed.

It occurred to me that I should find a pretty girl with a swaying ponytail and follow her the entire way. I found one, then another, but soon realized they were pretty at least partly because they were in such great shape, and I couldn't keep up. Mile six came and I was still hovering around the 10-minute mile pace. I seemed to have gotten past that initial feeling of soreness, and with my second-wind, I pushed on.

According to guides, the key to running a marathon is pacing. Fortunately for me, this was never a problem since my running came only at one speed: slow. The miles continued to pass through different ethnic neighborhoods in Brooklyn and Queens. In addition to Gatorade and water and Powerbars, all of which I started picking up at every mile, various hands were thrust into the street from the crowd. From these hands I picked up not only the usual leftover Halloween suspects like Tootsie Rolls and Peanut Chews and those strawberry candies that tasted nothing like strawberries and you wouldn't have otherwise known were supposed to be strawberry except for the fact that they were wrapped in a strawberry-like wrapper, but also Russian candies, Spanish candies, Polish candies, German candies, and candies with writing I

⁹ Greatness, then, assuming we make a distinction between good and bad, is accorded by significance in history. A quick mental rundown of great people reveals, to me at least, that none can be said to have lived according to how others advised them; if they did, they would have been like everyone else. Talent, of course, is what truly separates the great, but who can say where latent talent might lurk? Did Einstein know he was a genius when he was failing out of high school? It would be silly to dismiss anyone of having potential, but the question then becomes how much of it has been wasted because of an inability to catch it.

My sister tells me I am a control freak and though I didn't realize it at first, I don't disagree. Of course, like everyone else, I want to be a unique individual. Becoming a vegetarian doesn't accomplish this any more than quitting smoking, but I like to think that given a potentially unique situation, despite any daunting obstacles, I would have the confidence and ability and will power to claim it as my own; that if I fail, it is only because of factors I have no control over.

did not recognize. Some people held a seemingly disgusting and unrecognizable goo in their hands that I would, unfortunately, only later learn was petroleum jelly, useful for preventing chafing in the armpits and inner thighs. Most curiously and epicurean, right before heading onto the bridge into Manhattan from Queens, I picked up a skewer with grilled shrimp, and shouted a thank you to the man holding the serving plate. Running up the bridge, the only real incline thus far, I kept my mind off my burning quads and calves by savoring my delightful lunch.

As I reached the halfway point in 2:21:35, I realized that the winners had already finished. I cursed them silently as I struggled to imagine that I had another half to go. I must have begun to slow down a bit, my mind deciding that I needed a rest, when I heard from the crowd, “One step at a time!” and “Keep going!” and “You can do it!” and other advertising clichés. I laugh about it now, but it all made perfect sense at the time. My right contact lens had been bothering me all day, and, being fed up with it, I finally discarded it, leaving me only one eye with which to see. This caused me to lose depth perception, but that was probably to my advantage.

To pass the time and to psychologically shorten the race, I began dividing lengths into ever-smaller fractions. The fourteenth mile meant I was $14/26$ ths of the race done, or about $55/100$ ths. If a mile was about 5000 feet, and every step I took was about a foot, then each step got me $1/5000$ ths closer to the end, and at mile sixteen, with ten miles left, I only had about 50,000 steps left. 50,000, 49,999, 49,998, 49,997, 49,996...

At the eighteenth mile, or two-thirds¹⁰ of the way through, with something like 38,752 steps left, I really wanted to take a break. “Don’t stop! You’re almost there,” I heard someone

¹⁰ Like so many Chinese high school students, I was good at math. The eighteenth mile of a marathon is actually $90/131$ to the end, or $\sim 69\%$ done. Aptitude in math is easily explained: my father started teaching it to me early. My mother, like a good Chinese mother, wanted me to

say, but this just made me angry since it simply wasn't true. The problem with marathons is that you are never almost there: no matter where you are, you still have a really long way to go. So I slowed to a walk midway through the eighteenth mile, and though I felt slightly guilty, I rationalized I wasn't really going much slower anyway. At that point, even when "running", I did not seem to be going anywhere, and there were seventy-year-old grandparents speed-walking right past me.

I began to realize, however, that all the muscle and joint and bone pains were more pronounced when I was walking, and I discovered an incredible soreness in my right knee. At mile nineteen, I picked up some Icy Hot™ from the tables and slathered it all over my knee, taking comfort not from the medication but from all the other people doing the same.

It was preposterously difficult to start running again after having walked a good five minutes, but I convinced myself somehow, and hobbled on, favoring my left leg, telling myself that if I stopped again, there was a good chance I wouldn't be able to restart. Amazingly, there were still almost just as many people around me now as when I started, and the crowds hardly seemed to have dispersed. I kept my eyes on someone running slowly, and I tailed him the next few miles.

My time at the twentieth mile was 3:47:11, and although there were still six miles, or more than a quarter of the way to go, getting into the twenties felt really good. If I could run the

become a doctor or a lawyer or an engineer. At any rate, writer was far down on her list, possibly not on it at all, and I sometimes worry, especially when I sit in front of an empty page with not a whit of inspiration, that I don't really enjoy writing at all. Who knows? If my father wrote grammatically proper English, I might be trying to become a mathematician instead. Actually, both my parents wholeheartedly approve, and if I just wanted to be reactionary, I would have gone through with my plan to become a farmer. Do I really have any more talent for writing than I do for math or science or architecture or sculpting? I don't know, but when I sit down at my desk I usually think to myself, *yes, I do want to be a writer*, and that's good enough for me.

Maybe anyone can be a writer. Maybe anyone can do anything, and I just like making things difficult for myself.

next six miles in an hour and ten minutes, I'd be able to finish under five hours, so I kept a close eye on the clock the rest of the way. I ran into the Bronx and back to Manhattan ten minutes later, and mentally crossed off the last of the five boroughs. I was back alongside Central Park, now on the west side instead of the east, and my mind was starting to slip a little.

I had three miles to go with about thirty minutes left to make it in under five hours. I began to worry about "the wall" which I had read every runner hits and was the point where the muscle cells were depleted of all the energy they could hold and running became even more difficult. When I pushed passed the twenty-fourth and twenty-fifth miles without incident, I realized my wall was at mile eighteen or possibly mile four, and that I had already been running on empty since.

One mile left, and I could see the finish line in my mind. What is one mile after having ran twenty-five? Well, it's still one mile, and despite my best efforts to persuade myself that I could do one last dash to the end, I was only able to limp on, right-left, right-left, accent on the second beat. As I saw in the distance the twenty-sixth mile marker with a minute left till five hours, I was disheartened when I realized I had forgotten all about the .2, that very last decimal bit that killed Pheidippides when he ran that very first marathon from Marathon to Athens.

I gimped across mile twenty-six and I was still not almost there. That last fifth of a mile was the longest part of the race, especially now that I was discouraged, having passed the five-hour mark. Unfortunately for me, I had also forgotten about the five minutes it took for me to get to the start of the race, or I might have had a little more energy at the end had I known I was still close to getting a net time of under five hours. As it stood, even with the finish in sight, it was everything I could do to keep from stopping. A large clock above the finish line counted up as my mental clock counted down. Ten steps, nine, eight, seven, six, five, four, three, two, one.

Stepping across the finish, I cried for the first time since I was a child. It was the first time I had ever cried from pure joy, and it was the greatest feeling in the world. I couldn't imagine running even one more step, and I marveled at how the very last step I was able to take was exactly the one that got me to the end. I stood, hunched and with my hands on my knees, until a volunteer led me away so as not to block the path. A medal was hung around my neck and a Mylar blanket around my shoulders. I walked back to my belongings, a smile on my lips and my face gleaming.

Step 6: Count and recount until satisfied.

The next day, back at school and unable to walk, I looked myself up on the Internet: my official time was 5:05:29 and my net time was 5:00:50. I came in 25525th place. I was thrilled. 5:00:50 had a beautiful symmetry to it as did 25525, and I couldn't imagine that more than a dozen people could have come in 25525th place in *anything*. Sure, the first place guy ran it at a shade over two hours, won a car and \$100,000, but coming in first place happens at *every* competition, and taking into account that he must have logged hundreds of hours of training,¹¹ I, having spent approximately eight hours total on both training and the race, actually ran it much faster than he did. I ran a marathon faster than everyone.¹²

¹¹ Anyone can finish a marathon if they train for it. That's easy. I feel similarly about exams: anyone can do well if they study. Studying, I rationalized, was just another form of cheating, and as I was morally averse to cheating, I never did spectacularly in school.

Running a marathon without training was to me a validation of my will power and control over my life; it made me feel like I could do anything.

¹² When all else fails, there is always delusion. I implore you not to listen to me, a 24-year-old who has messed up knees and thinks he can tell you what to do. Who does he think he is? What the hell does he know?