

Run Your First Marathon / The 7 Day Training Program
By Tim Long

November 2nd: A Girl named Faith (really) calls the running store to ask whether anyone would like a complimentary entry for the Richmond Marathon which included hotel and the coveted pasta dinner the night before the race. Since I took the call, I say, “Well, how does it work?” She says that she’ll fax over the entry form and someone simply has to fill it out and send it back. “Yeah,” I reply, “someone would probably want to do it.” So I drag the two pieces of paper (fax cover sheet and faxed entry form) around with me for a few days. On Friday, November 6th, Faith’s boss, Michelle calls me to ask whether anyone was going to take advantage of the offer. Side note: I had been debating this in my mind for four days now, and came to the conclusion that it would be crazy to run my first marathon with absolutely no training or distance running. So I say, “Yeah, sure, I’d really like to do it.” Ten minutes later I have fax confirmation that my filled out entry form has reached her. Later that day I have confirmation numbers for my marathon entry, hotel room, and dinner. Then it hits me; I have to run a marathon in seven days. I start asking myself, “Will I die? What do people mean by ‘hitting the wall’? How much water do I need? Should I walk? Do I need one of those Fuel Belt thingys?” Then I remember standing and cheering the runners at mile 23 of the Boston Marathon watching thousands of runners go by, and seeing lots of men with bloody shirts from chafed nipples. Now I’m just plain scared.

Organization: Okay, it’s day one of my training. I’ll do a long run. I think to myself, “That’s what marathon training is hinged on, long runs.” Saturday, November 6th, I do eleven miles. Okay, that’s not so bad. The long run is out of the way. Sunday I am going to rest but instead do a 35 mile bike ride in the morning, then a brisk 5 mile run at night. “Cross training, lots of marathon runners cross train.” I say to myself. Monday is a rest day. Tuesday I go out for an easy 5 miles after work at “marathon pace”. At this point I should point out that my goal marathon pace (if I ever run one with the intent to do well) is 6:27/mile (2:49 marathon). Granted, I had no intention of trying to run a 2:49 race. With no training and not knowing what to expect I just wanted to finish so I could come home without being embarrassed. So, when I say “marathon pace” for this run it means 8 mins/mile. Wednesday the 10th, I do another 5 miles. This time a little faster, maybe 6:45 pace. I call this the speed-work of my training program. Thursday I go out and do 2 miles before the Thomas Street Tavern Run, then hang out and watch other folks run. The running portion of my training is done, and now I start the tapering portion of my marathon training program. I rest on Friday mostly because I’m driving 300 miles to Richmond, VA.

It was pouring rain the ENTIRE 5 hours to Richmond. When I get there at 4PM, I'm exhausted. After checking into the hotel and finding a map to the start line (the hotel is a long 4.5 miles from the start line of the marathon), I drive down to the expo to pick up my packet, take in some of the marathon energy, and have my pasta dinner with a special guest speaker from Runner's World, Bart Yasso, who shares a slide show accompanied by entertaining commentary on many of the more memorable races and runs he's covered, including the Bad Water 146 Mile Race, Antarctica Marathon, Kilimanjaro Marathon, and some other interesting places and runs he's both run and written about. The dinner was first-rate and the speaker matched it with wit and inspiration. I was nervous about the next day and let the other people at my dinner table know my trepidations. They offer encouraging words, but I can see in their expressions that they feel I might be either drunk or crazy or both, and that I'll be lying under a water stop at the curb around mile 14 the next day. I drive back to the hotel and fall asleep watching the Weather Channel, hopping it would stop raining before the race start so my new shoes wouldn't get wet.

Race morning: The alarm wakes me at 4:55AM, and I realize that I'll be starting my first marathon in three hours. At that moment I wonder whether anyone would believe that I slept through my alarm and couldn't make the start. Then a bit of confidence pushes its way in and forces me into the shower. With the image of the bloody nipples I saw in Boston, I had taken the liberty of packing two band-aids for the trip. After applying them I lather myself up in Body Glide. At least if I die, I won't be chafed. I'm out the door at 6AM.

Being this early, I find a decent and free parking spot two blocks from the start line (though unknown at the time, much further from the finish line which will be a factor later). Knowing there will be Cliff Shot energy gels starting at mile 14, I take three gels in a zip lock bag to cover the first 14 miles. The weather had changed and had stopped raining, but was now 40 degrees with a 20mph wind that took your breath away. I chose to wear running shorts, a long sleeved shirt with my Sharksbite singlet over it, along with some gloves. At this point I realize I don't have safety pins to secure my bib number. "No problem" I think. Being a race director, organizer, timer, and participant of many races I'm sure to have four safety pins in my car somewhere. After 10 minutes I can't even find one, so I give up and head to the start area with my bib number in one hand and my little zip lock bag of gels in the other. The wind is whipping through the hilly streets of Richmond with newspapers and other debris flying around. I get to the general start area and realize there is no place to stay warm or to get away from the wind, so I head over to the line of 80 porta-potties and climb into the first one. Since it's so early no one has used it yet, so the smell isn't bad. I think to

myself how smart I am to be in there keeping warm away from the wind. After about 10 minutes or so, I hear more and more voices outside, and peak my head out to see a line of people waiting to use MY porta-pottie. Once I slink out of that situation, I simply go back to the car two blocks away and wait for the start. Oh, and I finally find someone who gives me four safety pins three minutes before the race begins. I find a group holding a big sign that says "3:30 pace group". I assume it's either a bible passage or an anticipated finish time. I figure an 8 minute pace is ambitious, but possibly doable, so I slip in behind them. The race starts and I am taking it very easy, almost scared to have my feet touch the ground because I have counted the steps it will take to finish 26.2 miles.

The first six miles go by easily enough. I'm very observant of my surroundings, the spectators, the runners around me, the stuff left on the street. I start wondering whether the rest of the 20 miles are this easy. Then I notice that I'm trotting along at just over an 8:00/mile pace. "Should I pick it up?" I wonder. "What would my finish time be if I ran the rest of the way at 7:30, 7:00, or 6:30 pace?" I decide to bump it up to a 7:30 pace. At mile 10 I pull up alongside Jody, a guy from Eastern N.C. who is an IRONMAN triathlete. He says he's shooting for a 3:20-3:30 finish time. We run and chat together for three miles. At the half way point (13.1 miles) I'm at 1hour: 38mins. I have to pee, so I lose a couple minutes but feel better. Now I decide to pick up my pace. By mile 16 I'm getting hints of cramps in my legs and doubts start creeping into my mind. My thoughts have gone from noticing the mundane of immediate surroundings to the intangible. I start thinking about my dad, past girlfriends, tough situations I've been in before. Now I'm on this long bridge between mile 16 and 17. The wind was bitter and whipping straight into my face. I come up to a smallish woman who's making fast steady progress. I'm tempted to sit behind her and let her break the head wind for me, but instead I come up around and in front of her. "Should we share the lead to cut the wind for each other?" She kindly asks. "Naw, I'm feeling strong," I lie. "Just stay behind me." Surprisingly, helping her get over that mile-long bridge made *me* 'feel' strong. Funny how the mind works. Now there's less than ten miles to go, but I'm hurting. The bones in my feet feel like someone's smashing them with a hammer. The muscles in my legs are getting tighter with each step. I decide to stop at mile 18 to stretch and rub my legs, more lost time.

Now with seven miles to go I know I'll finish, no matter what happens. I'm determined. The questions now were how much faster can I go, and how much damage will I do to my body. I figure I'll run the last 10k (6.2 miles) in 40 minutes to make up for the stops I'd made. Mile 20 I have to stop again. This time I really stretch out my legs. When I start back up I pick a guy in a red shirt who's probably a quarter mile down the road (this is a 2 mile

straight stretch of road). I'm catching that guy no matter what. My feet ache, so I run faster and faster until I stop thinking about my feet. At mile 25 I pass the red shirt guy and pick it up to a 6:30 pace. Much of the last mile is downhill with lots of spectators. I run the last half-mile at a sub 6:00 min pace and cross the finish line thinking I wouldn't be able to stop. But I did, and bent over to take my timing chip off. At that point this lady swings this finisher's medal into my face bouncing it off my forehead, and then hangs it around my neck.

I wander away from the finish and lie down on the sidewalk. I did it. My dad would be proud. He loved hearing and reading about my bike racing and I'm sure he would have made the trip to see me finish my first marathon if he were still alive. I decide that my efforts were for him.

Being at the race by myself, there's no reason to hang out so I get up off the sidewalk. My legs and feet are hurting, badly. Now I realize that the finish is six blocks from where I parked the car. It takes me twenty minutes to hobble back to it. After I take a shower and have some lunch, I drive the five hours back to Charlotte. Oh, my finish time was 3:13 – decent enough to qualify for the Boston Marathon.

Some final thoughts: DO NOT try running your first marathon with no training. I did it because I like a challenge and doing spontaneous things. I doubt I'll be selling my 7 Day Marathon Training Program. My body paid the price the next morning. You will enjoy the experience and perform much better if you train and prepare properly for your race. I'll probably run Boston, but I'm sure I'll wait until the week before to sign up for it.