

Inside the Minds of Marathoners

Finishing 26.2 miles takes weeks, and months, of prepping your body. But what runs through your mind can lead to even bigger strides. Follow in the footsteps of these elite marathoners for a mental game plan that will power you to any goal. **BY MALLORY CREVELING**

Olympic bronze medalist Deena Kastor was halfway through the 2019 Tokyo Marathon when a man shoved her, knocking her to the ground. Then, in the final 15K of the race, another man checked Kastor in the shoulder. These were, of course, not things she prepared for. In her decorated history (she has completed more than 20 marathons and is the American record holder in the distance), the only other time things had gotten physical was back in college at cross-country championships. With bloody hands—and, she later found out, a dislocated shoulder—the 46-year-old stayed focused on a cup of soup and a Mylar blanket waiting for her at the finish. She completed the race in 2:51, earning her fifth World Marathon Major.

Elite middle-distance runner Emily Sisson had never raced 26.2 miles until the London Marathon this past April. “One thing my teammate told me on the start line was don’t think too far ahead. Just think about the next bottle station,” says Sisson. That breaks it up into 5Ks, which is much more manageable mentally. “So that’s pretty much what I did throughout the race.” That strategy paid off: The 28-year-old snagged the second-fastest marathon debut by an American woman.

Completing a marathon obviously takes a strong physical game. But it requires an even stronger mental game—a stiff cocktail of positive self-talk and small goal setting, excited patience, and the ability to adjust when adversity (or another runner) hits. “We spend so much time and attention on our physical training program, like what mileage to hit and what pace to run,” says Kastor. “But I would say that people should put as much energy into their mental training program.”

Elite marathoners like Kastor and Sisson are not immune to nerves and negative thinking. But with hours, days, weeks, even years spent logging miles, these women have honed a heady fortress for keeping not only their feet on track, but their minds, too. How do they prepare for the long, arduous grind? How do they handle the unpredictable obstacles that will inevitably come their way? We went the distance with some of the country’s best female marathoners to learn the



most valuable psychological skills they’ve cultivated—and how you can follow their lead.

The Perception (And Reality) of Control

There are so many emotions that go into training for, and ultimately running, a marathon: excitement, pride, nerves, anxiety. And they creep in long before the race begins.

“Self-doubt doesn’t just happen at the 20-mile mark of a marathon,” says Kastor. “It happens the week when you’re tapering and you’re like, *Oh my gosh, all of a sudden my calves are tight and I wish we just had one more month of training.*” The list of worries can go on and on, but for most athletes, the feelings are universal: “I’m not as nervous on the starting line as I am a week or two leading up to the race if I feel an old injury pop up or some travel plans don’t go well,” says Sisson. “I’m working so hard for the one race that I don’t want anything to go wrong.”

Anticipatory anxiety is normal and almost expected with endurance events, says Carrie Cheadle, certified mental performance consultant and author of *On Top of Your Game*. “When so much time and energy and resources have gone into your training, there’s a different kind of pressure that comes with that. But it’s important to remember that there’s nothing you can do in the last week that’s going to have any significant impact on your fitness, so now it’s about making sure you’re mentally ready so that you can utilize your physical fitness.”

For Kastor, that means finding her confidence. “I start flipping



through my training log and looking at all the reasons that I should succeed, instead of the reasons why I may fail,” she says. “I pick the best three reasons for success, and I commit them to my memory. I repeat them anytime something negative jumps in my head.”

For Des Linden, 2018 Boston Marathon winner, it’s a different kind of list. “I write out a race plan the night before,” she says. “I know what my meal’s going to be; I know what I have on my playlist; I know what my warm-up looks like. I know what I need to do when the gun goes off. You’re staying off the path of letting your mind wander and just sticking to a plan.”

Both are forms of stress management, something experts say is crucial. “In sports psychology, we talk about coping as the process for dealing with negative emotions or stress,” says Jedediah Blanton, Ph.D., assistant professor of practice in the department of kinesiology at the University of Tennessee Knoxville. There are two main types: emotion-focused techniques, which help you feel less reactive to the stressors you face or change the way you see them so they don’t have the same impact; and problem-focused coping, which aims to eliminate the source of stress or find a productive way to control the stressors you’re facing.

The key is knowing when to use which type: “Emotion-focused coping—meaning how to feel about the problem—is what you need for fears out of your control,” says Blanton. Kastor knows she can’t change the race date even if she feels worried about

being prepared enough; she can, however, remind herself of all the hard work she has put in by reviewing her training log as a way to help change her perception of the nerves she’s feeling.

When you recognize what you can control, really seize it by utilizing problem-focused coping, says Blanton. Like Linden’s race plan checklist, executing simple things like setting your alarm, laying out your gear, double-checking the start time, and charging your watch will help you cope with pre-race stress by focusing on taking care of the problem.

The Delicate Balance of Macro and Micro

It’s a cliché, sure, but there’s a reason for the saying “it’s a marathon, not a sprint.” Standout middle-distance runner Molly Huddle learned that quickly after racing her first marathon in 2016. “I always say the marathon is a mature person’s race,” says Huddle. “You can’t get too emotional or too excited too early. You have to be able to stay calm and control yourself.”

At the starting line, more than any other time, it’s crucial to think about the big picture. Linden does it by considering the first 20 miles as her transportation to the start of the race—the last 10K is when the fun really starts. “You’re not going to set your PR in the first couple of miles,” she says. “There’s no such thing as banking time in a marathon, but you can really wreck your day. I just keep that in the back of my mind, thinking, ‘The only thing I can do right now is screw up my day, so just be patient and wait for the race to actually get moving.’”



Sisson takes a second to pause and be grateful. “It might seem a little cheesy, but after periods of injury or setback, and as I’ve aged, I’ve gotten more thankful for every opportunity to get on the starting line and compete,” she says. That small moment of mindfulness can help set your body and mind to stay steady and calm, says Cheadle.

But while a macro perspective can keep you from crashing too early in a race, taking that same long-lens approach all the time can backfire. Like in training, for example. “It’s daunting to think, ‘I still have eight more weeks of really hard training before I race,’” says Sisson. “So instead of thinking that way, I tried to focus on the week, or the day, or the workout I was in, and not get too far ahead of myself.” That ability to think about the very small picture helped her during the race, too. When it really started to hurt and the miles really started to drag on, when even the thought of reaching the next bottle station was too much, she would zero in on something even smaller. “I’d think, *okay, lift your knees, pump your arms*,” Sisson says. “Just focus on this, just this movement.”

In sports psychology, experts talk about three main types of goals: outcome, performance, and process. An outcome goal, like getting first place, is something largely outside of your control.

It’s the big picture. “These types of goals are good for long-term motivation but should have minimal focus.” A performance goal (such as finishing in a certain time) is what you’re personally trying to achieve. While it typically isn’t impacted by others, you’re still not fully in control—for example, you could wake up to a cold rainstorm on the morning of your race, which negatively impacts your pace and finish time. Process goals, on the other hand, are totally and completely under your control. They are the small steps that move you forward in this moment.

“The reason process goals work so well comes back to control,” Blanton says. “When all you have is a big goal, you’re constantly thinking, *Where am I in relation to this goal?*” You can see runners when they’re stressed and their head drops, shoulders slump, face crinkles, and they just run inefficiently.” A process goal, on the other hand, gives you moments of success throughout the race. By emphasizing a singular goal and achieving it, your body reacts positively at a physiological level, says Blanton. And that can build momentum to keep you going.

The Weight of Your Words

For all the uncertainties that come with training for and running a marathon, you can pretty much guarantee negativity showing up—ready to knock down your hope and determination.

Developing a mental framework to protect yourself from it could possibly be the most beneficial part of your training.

“Watching what you say and what you speak over yourself is powerful,” says elite distance runner Sara Hall. “What’s the story you’re telling yourself? Be aware of that.” A great example: Hall came into this year’s Boston Marathon with only six weeks of training due to injury, but because her tempo runs went so well, she thought it could go either way. Around mile 10, her quads were already feeling heavy. “There was nothing I could do about it, so I was just trying to stay positive,” she says. “Looking back at it I looked terrible, but in the moment I was saying, ‘You’re doing great.’ You just have to get good at lying to yourself.”

For some, switching negative thoughts to positive ones comes easy; it’s a natural reaction. For others, particularly in those especially tough miles, clearing the mind of any pessimism is simply not realistic. But that doesn’t give you a pass to let your defeatist attitude spiral out of control.

“Try your process goals to help you stay in the moment and help you win the moment,” says Cheadle. “Ask, ‘What do you need to do right now in order to get through this moment successfully?’ That way, instead of identifying positive self-talk, it’s more informational.” (If you tend to lean more glass-half-empty, you may benefit more from going into a run with a plan of how you’ll address those moments along the way, says Blanton.)

Linden tends to tell herself, “calm, calm, calm, relax, relax,

Remember This

“Your physical training gets you [to the race], but so many people end up sabotaging themselves because they don’t do the mental training,” says Cheadle. “So, if you really want to be able to look back on the event no matter what happened and feel good about what you did that day, your mental training is a significant part of the ability to do that.”



relax” and check in on a loose jaw, relaxed shoulders, and standing taller. It’s not “positive thinking,” per se, but it’s not negative, either. That neutral approach can be just what you need to ride out a tough patch. She will also turn her attention to something bigger than the race itself and the hard moment she’s in. “You’re out there alone, but ultimately we all have teams behind us, and for me, I just think about those people and how I’m going to talk to them after the race and whether I can say, ‘Did I give everything?’”

What all great marathoners have in common is their mental flexibility. “We’re so fortunate to be able to keep filling our toolbox with different ways to learn and grow,” says Kastor. When Plans A, B, and C don’t work, they know it’s just an opportunity to create a Plan D. “I think the longest-running mantra that I’ve used is ‘define yourself,’ and to me that means that it isn’t about the race or how you finish. It’s about how you carry yourself through it. Some of my races that I’m most proud of are races that I might have been fifth or sixth, but I feel like I have never been tougher. I’m so proud of the forward push and grind that lasted for miles upon miles, when water stations seemed like the best place to kick my feet up and rest. Those are the races that I feel so proud in persisting through.”

The best part about those tough races, those Plan Ds you never intended to make? They don’t just make you a stronger runner. “The things I work on with my athletes, they’re life skills as much as they are performance enhancement skills,” says Cheadle. “Both ask, ‘Do I have the tools to be able to face the challenges that come at me with competence and resilience?’” By building the thought habits of these women, you will. ♦

Remember This

The starting line is a particularly smart place to use your emotion-focused coping tools. Those butterflies you’re feeling—that light, somewhat woozy sensation of your stomach turning—there’s been research that shows elite marathoners see it as a cue that they’re ready, while less experienced athletes tend to think, *Oh no, something is wrong*, says Blanton. “It’s an interpretation of the same physiological change.” Remind yourself, you are ready for this.