Marathon Training and Racing for the Advanced Competitor

Part 1: Don't make the mistake of training the way runners do

Not many years ago, few inline races in excess of 10 km existed. But that's not true anymore. Today, there are dozens of inline marathons, and more long-distance events are popping up every year. While the standard marathon distance is 26.2 miles (42 km), there are also a few ultramarathon races of 100 km or more.

But the information age has yet to catch up with the marathon skater. While some web and print resources exist for novice skaters, there's not much out there for advanced skaters. And it is often the advanced skaters who want more. After skating a few marathons, they're no longer content with simply finishing. They want to go fast and do well.

Train Smart

Whenever you think about training, be sure to consider these key variables: volume, intensity, rest, and recovery. These variables determine how your training affects your performance.

One of the least understood of the variables is volume, which is the mileage logged by skaters as they prepare for events. The truth is that most skaters log way too many miles while ignoring anaerobic conditioning and recovery.

Runner You Are Not!

Inliners often look to marathon running as a guide to skate training. But this often leads to faulty training methods and, ultimately, poor outcomes. The truth is: running a marathon is quite different than skating one. Running a marathon is primarily an individual undertaking and therefore demands a steady pace. Skating a marathon is a pack sport (like road cycling) that involves a highly varied pace with frequent bursts of speed (due to breakaways).

Another difference involves impact levels. The pounding motion of running puts a lot of stress on leg muscles. Marathon runners condition themselves to handle the stress by running as much as 20 to 23 miles a day in the final stage of training. But the pushing motion of skating involves far less impact. Therefore, skaters don't need this kind of conditioning.

Another difference involves duration. Marathon distances are the same for runners and skaters, but skaters go about twice as fast. Therefore, they complete marathons in about half the time. An advanced skater can finish a marathon in 1:30-1:40 (hours/minutes) while an advanced runner will take 3-3:20. To prepare for marathons, runners log training sessions of 2:30-2:45. By comparison, skaters only need sessions of about 1:20.

So why do many marathon skaters log workouts of three hours or more? ... I'm baffled by this. But don't get me wrong: Base preparation and logging miles is an important stage in pre-season training. However, once a skater is reasonably fit and can comfortably skate the distance, the emphasis should shift to speed, which is where many skaters go astray.

Part 2: Wanna Race Fast? ... Train Fast

One of the most profound misconceptions in training is the notion that skating lots of miles will improve your speed. I'm sorry to disappoint all you mega-mileage freaks, but skating a ton of miles won't make you faster.
That's not to say that it's not good for you. Piling on the miles will burn calories, improve your cardiovascular performance, and elevate your relative muscular endurance. But these are NOT the things that allow you to go fast over a distance of 26 miles! The only way to race fast is to train fast, and this is where interval and "fartlek" training come into play.
Most skaters know what interval training is. But few understand the science behind it. As a result, they don't know how to adapt it to the events they are preparing for. They do the same intervals whether they are preparing for a 10K or a marathon. And that's simply wrong.
Here are some rules to keep in mind:

No. 1
If you are fit and can comfortably skate the distance of your upcoming race, you do not need to increase your weekly mileage by more than about 15 percent.

No. 2

In preparing for a race, do a long skate once a week. This skate should be about 80-110 percent of your race distance. (So, therefore, if you are preparing for a marathon, you should do one skate a week of 20-28 miles.)

No. 3
Twice a week, do hard interval workouts. (These sessions will be the primary mechanism to make you fast!)

No. 4
At least once a week, do a "fartlek" workout of roughly half the marathon distance. (Fartlek training consist of bursts of intense activity alternated with periods of less strenuous effort.)

No. 5
Give yourself two days of rest each week, which only leaves one day of the week unaccounted for. On that day, give yourself an easy-to-moderate recovery workout.

No. 6
Follow this weekly training cycle until 7-10 days before your race. At that point, you should "peak and taper": reduce volume while maintaining intensity.

Part 3: Interval training for marathon skaters

Competing in a marathon is a lot like competing in a 10K. The pace changes often with periods of relatively relaxed skating punctuated by hard surges as skaters chase breakaways or go on fliers of their own.

To be successful under these conditions, you need three things: endurance, the ability to accelerate, and the ability to recover. Endurance will get you to the finish line; but you also need the ability to accelerate (so you don't get left behind by the pack) and the ability to recover (so you get the rest you need between surges).

One of the best tools for developing these skills is interval training.

Here are two interval workouts especially designed to prepare skaters for marathons:

Workout No. 1

* warm up: 5 minutes at a constant pace, then 5 minutes progressing to race pace in the final minute.
* 4 reps of 5 minutes at 80-85 percent effort with 3 minutes active recovery (very slow skating) between each.
* rest - 8 minutes
* 2 fartleks (variable speed interval) of 10 minutes each with 2-3 minutes rest.
* rest - 3 minutes
* 5 100m sprints with 90 seconds rest between them
* cooldown: 10 minutes

Workout No. 2

* warm up: 5 minutes at a constant pace, then 5 minutes progressing to race pace in the final minute.
* 2 minutes on at 90 effort, followed immediately by 1 minute off at 60 percent effort. Repeat 6-8 times (6 ons and 6 offs).
* rest - 5 minutes
* 3 minutes on at 80-85 percent effort, followed immediately by 1 minute off at 60 percent effort. Repeat 4-6 times.
* cooldown: 10 minutes

Interval training is only one part of marathon training. Seasonal planning and periodization (doing the right thing at the right time of year) are also important tools.

Skaters should also gradually and progressively increase their training load over the weeks and months leading up to a race. And follow this by a systematic reduction in training load in the final one or two weeks before for the big day.

Part 4: Maximizing Your Starts and Resting While You Race

Start Fast To Finish Quick, and learn to rest along the way!

Here's something few skaters seem to realize: The start of a marathon is just as important as the start of a shorter race, like a 10K.

Marathons aren't necessarily won by the rabbits (the racers who shoot out of the starting line first). But if you want a good finish, it's important to get off the line quickly and find yourself a hard-working paceline as soon as possible.

To illustrate my point, let's consider the example of two skaters of equal ability: Skater A lines up near the starting line before the start and skates aggressively as soon as the gun goes off. Skater B, on the other hand, starts a few rows back and is more cautious in the early goings.

Within the first mile, two pacelines form. Only 10 seconds separate them, but the first pack (containing Skater A) is moving 2 percent faster than the second pack. By the time it reaches the finish line, it will be five minutes ahead of the slower pack (containing Skater B).

And what was the cost of this better finish for Skater A?

Not much. Due to the benefits of drafting, Skater A didn't expend any more energy than Skater B.

So here's the moral of the story: Make sure you get into the right paceline at the beginning of the race.

And how do you know if you're in the right paceline? ... Find one that will challenge you.

Here's a rule of thumb: If you are able to lead a paceline much of the time, it is too slow for you. Ideally, you want to find a paceline with skaters who are faster than you are, even though that makes leading a little scary.

Workhorses and Wheel Suckers

If you've skated a few marathons, you know that quite often a paceline contains both workhorses (those who push the pace at the front) and wheel suckers (those who struggle at the rear).

If you regularly find yourself in the role of workhorse, get over it: You are not optimizing your time or placement.

Instead, skate harder at the start of the race and get yourself into a paceline that is faster than you are.

Learn How to Rest

Here's my final tip for improving your performance in marathons: Learn to grab rest on the fly.

What this means is taking as few strides as possible from start to finish. Many skaters continue to stride even when they don't need to. Instead, put your hands on your knees and rest and glide whenever the opportunity arises, such as when the pace momentarily slackens or you are descending a hill.

Always remember to be efficient. Think of rest as a way to "bank" your strength. Each time you save a few strides, you are banking the energy you would have used. The energy you save with each stride may seem miniscule but it adds up. By the end of the race, you can take a "withdrawal" and spend it to your final sprint!