



Should I run a marathon?

This is a question I hear a lot in the off-season. As athletes sit down to figure out what they want to do – and what will keep them motivated in the winter months – should I run a marathon is a common question.

I work primarily with adult triathletes and a handful of pure runners. As usual, the answer I give depends on the athlete's specific situation. Here are a few of the pros and cons for picking a marathon as a winter or spring seasonal goal event. At the end of the article, I illustrate a few specific situations for you to ponder.

Pros:

- Lots of people to train with in most locations
- Helps develop running endurance
- Easy to train for during the winter as far as weather conditions go – in most locations
- Helps you become more fit or maintain lean physique & body composition

Cons:

- Chances for injury increase due to higher mileage
- May limit your top end speed depending on your training approach
- Your food bill will go up
- You will *have to* do some long runs to prepare adequately

For pure runners:

The question is simpler to answer. A) Are you prone to injury? B) Is the marathon your main goal? C) Have you run one before? D) Do you want to be competitive or just finish?

If the answer to A is yes, marathon training really is increasing your chance for injury,

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even if you substitute things like water running and riding for general run endurance training.

But, if your answer to B is yes, then you may feel the training is worth the risk. If the answer to C is yes, then you already know what it feels like and some of the risks associated with it, which means your eyes are open. And the answer to D can help craft the approach – arrive safely at the finish line with minimal risk and a reasonable time, or walk that fine line of higher mileage and aggressive pacing and shoot for the moon.

For triathletes:

The question is a bit more complex. A) Remains the same. B) Are you training for an Ironman? C) Have you run a marathon before? D) Same as above.

If you're a triathlete prone to injury, then whether you're ultimately training for an Ironman or not, marathon training during the winter is not for you. Just stick to lower mileage with a half-marathon and a few shorter runs. Why take the risk that you'll be derailed due to the many running related issues you can run into? When you build up to the Ironman you'll use a lower run / higher bike mileage approach.

If you're a bit sturdier, have never run a marathon, and do want to compete in an Ironman, then a marathon in the spring is not a bad idea. I generally advise my athletes to approach it with the goal of being healthy at both the start and finish lines. Nonetheless there are risks associated with the training, but the mental confidence an athlete can gain from getting a marathon under the belt can be worth the risk.

If you're carrying extra weight via muscle mass or adipose tissue, high mileage marathon training is going to be very hard on your joints. Adopt a plan that will help you approach a more optimal body composition before you hit the starting line of a marathon. Just my opinion.

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For short course triathletes that have no intention of racing an Ironman, there's no convincing training reason to run a marathon. You're best off focusing on developing speed and muscular endurance via shorter racing distances. You could do some higher mileage periods, then race a half-marathon at full speed with less chance for hurting yourself.

Bottom line: If you really want to run a marathon, find a good training plan for your ability and experience level. If you're just fishing for something to do to stay motivated, give it a few second thoughts.

Marty Gaal, CSCS, owns One Step Beyond with his wife Bri Gaal. He has been coaching adults since 2002. He has been avoiding marathons most of his life but still ran six of them over the years.