Marathon Recovery

By Michael Gordon, MD, Milwaukee Orthopaedic Group, Ltd. Orthopedic Surgery, Sports Medicine Fellowship

Now that the marathon is over, are you wondering what to do with all of your free “training” time? Know that the recovery program you follow after an endurance event is equally important as the training program you use to prepare for an event. While there are a vast number of theories on how best to recover and return to one’s normal routine, there isn’t a “one size fits all” program – I strongly subscribe to the “listen to your body” approach.

The classic teaching is that it takes about a day for your body to recover from every mile that you run. For most first-time marathoners, that’s probably pretty true; it’s a good and simple rule to follow. But what does that really mean? Should you sit at home on your couch eating bon-bons all day until finally 26 days have passed and you decide to blow the dust off of your running shoes? Of course not! I’m a big fan of embarking on a gentle post-race run when your legs feel ready. For some people, this is a day or two after the marathon – for others, it may be the following weekend. Run below marathon or race pace, this is a leisure jaunt to help you work-out your running muscles and stretch the tissue.

This is the point where runners can vary their recovery programs. Some folks are ready to return to a regular training program, while others are still working out the heaviness and achiness in their legs. “Listening to your body” is critical – it can set you up for a successful or disastrous off-season.

In addition to your recovery, the first few weeks after a marathon are a great time to identify what you want to work on during your next big run.

Do you want to finish faster?

Perform better on the hills?
Rid yourself of that nagging injury?

Handle weather conditions better?

Establishing goals will help you to set a “road map” for your off-season training – it will allow you to focus on the critical components to ultimately improve your running performance.

What else can help you through the recovery period? I’m a huge fan of a good massage scheduled on a regular basis throughout your training program. In addition, I find massages to be extremely beneficial soon after completing an endurance event. The deep tissue work can help to break up the adhesions that form from the muscles that are injured while running, as well as stretch the tight and contracted tissue.

What about the role of nutrition? There are a number of products out on the market specifically sold as “recovery drinks” claiming to have the perfect blend of protein and carbohydrates (and sometimes even extra special ingredients that are advertised to be the keys to good health). I don’t claim to be a nutritionist or an expert on this area, but fluids and electrolytes (“salt”) are critical to a speedy recovery. Additionally, there are multiple good studies demonstrating the benefit of protein in the early recovery period. Somewhat surprisingly, studies have shown chocolate milk to be nature’s perfect recovery drink (and I don’t think it was sponsored by the Wisconsin Milk Marketing Board!)

Finally, I would like to thank everyone who came out to the Build-Up Runs helping to make this program so successful. Jon Mueller does an incredible job of organizing the runs, the course and volunteers! And, many, many thanks to his group of dedicated volunteers who are out there supporting a TRAINING run on those hot and muggy summer mornings. On-site every week, the athletic trainers and physical therapists from the Aurora Sports Medicine Institute once again provided great advice and reassurance to many of the program participants.

Personally, this was the most challenging marathon that I have ever run beginning with the unfavorable weather conditions (read HOT and HUMID!) and limited training due to my own injury. The support from all of the runners on the course, as well as the spectators lining the roads, was invaluable and helped me reach my goal of finishing Lakefront 2007 in memory of Tracey Sweet. Congratulations to all of the marathon finishers – I look forward to seeing you out on the lakefront … even if it is a little bit cooler than the last time we ran together!

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