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By Bruce Deacon

Running “Through” The Hills

Although I wouldn't call the Royal Victoria Marathon course hilly, I would say it rolls. There are few places where you are not going up or down, even if it is just a slight incline. So the better you are at running hills, the more successful you will be.

The key to running hills in a marathon or half marathon is to focus on rhythm and running efficiency. Don't charge the hill, but rather run through it. Attempt to keep the same leg turnover as you climb the hill by leaning into the hill and shortening your stride. Avoid trying to pump your arms to climb, but rather focus on using your arms to help set the rhythm for your stride.

When going downhill, the temptation will be to try to make time. With gravity on your side, it is easy to be lured into picking up the pace and pushing things along. Over the length of the marathon or half marathon this is a mistake. Instead use the downhills as free energy. They allow you to rest a bit and conserve your energy.

Preparing for the hills need not involve a lot of specific hill work. Pick some hilly routes for your long runs, getting used to the feeling of running through a hill when you are feeling fatigued. Plan your training courses to have some gentle inclines and some longer steep hills. Much of running hills is actually mental. The more confident you are in being able to run up and down without losing too much energy, the better you will be.

Fuelling On the Run

Running or walking long distance all comes down to fuel efficiency. During endurance events your body primarily relies on carbohydrates and fats as its primary sources of fuel. Most of your fuel will come from burning a mixture of carbs and fats. The intensity of your running will control the burn mixture of these two fuels. For instance, the harder you run, the greater the proportion of carbohydrates you burn. Conversely, slower exercise uses a greater proportion of fats.

Carbohydrates have some advantages. They burn much more efficiently than fats. This means that your body needs more oxygen to break down each calorie from fat than it would to get a similar calorie from carbohydrates. They can be stored for future use. They can even be eaten in small quantities during exercise.

There is a hitch, though. While your body can store infinite amounts of energy as fat, it is limited in its ability to store carbohydrates. As your carbohydrate stores begin to dwindle, your body then starts to burn more and more fats. This requires increasingly more oxygen. Since you are limited in the amount of oxygen that your body can take in, you just can't compensate by breathing more. Little by little you run out of accessible fuel. You are forced to slow down your pace in order to access this fat. In marathon terms this is called “hitting the wall”, and trust me, it can rival a trip to the dentist in terms of terms of agony.

Of course one way to meet your race fuel needs is to load-up on the run using gels and other simple on-the-run fuels. These gels pack about a hundred calories in simple carbohydrate form, giving you a quick boost late in the race. Some come with caffeine to help release fatty acids that also be used for fuel. However, some runners find that introducing caffeine tot their systems causes them to run for the loo and not for the finish line.

Now is the time to experiment with the various gels and sports drinks. You will find that some work well for you and that others don't. It is better to discover what doesn't sit well in your tummy now than at 30 km of the marathon. Also, make sure that you consume them with water to assist their digestion.

Questions, Questions, Questions

Do you have questions about your training? Now is the time to ask. Email Bruce Deacon at coachbruce@royalvictoriamarathon.com.