

Tapering and Race Preparation for Racewalkers

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- Introduction

Most racewalkers, through trial and error, eventually settle on a training schedule that works best for them. Unfortunately, many of these same walkers become bewildered in the final weeks and days before an important race, either training too much or too little. Another common problem is failure to specifically prepare the body and mind for conditions they will likely experience during competition. This article may give some guidance to these athletes.

- Acclimatization

One of the most important, yet least utilized training tools available to the racewalker is acclimatization. Acclimatizing means subjecting and adapting the body to environmental conditions similar to those that will be experienced during important races. The first step in an effective acclimatization is reconnaissance. Find out as much as you possibly can about the race course, likely weather conditions and any other variables that may affect your race. Will the competition be at sea level or altitude? Indoors or out? Are the conditions likely to be hot and humid? Is the course hilly or flat? Road or track? Will the race begin at 6:00 am or 5:00 pm? Athletes are often told to ignore these factors because they affect every athlete equally. This is absolutely false! The body is adaptable to many deleterious environmental factors, so the prepared athlete will gain an advantage over his non-acclimated competitors.

Examples:

- 1. Weather- Extreme heat and humidity inhibit the body's ability to cool itself. The body can adapt to these conditions to some degree, however. These adaptations occur fairly rapidly, with full adaptation occurring within ten to fourteen days. By training in hot and humid conditions, or by artificially creating these conditions by wearing sweats during workouts, an athlete can gain an advantage over athletes not specifically preparing for these weather extremes.
- 2. Altitude- Racing at altitude poses a unique challenge for endurance athletes who train at sea level. Unfortunately the only practical way to prepare for a race at altitude is to train in these conditions for at least six weeks before the event. The good news is that most championship races are not at altitude. Sea level athletes unable to acclimate should plan to race at a pace 7-10% slower than they would be able to maintain at lower elevations. Since altitude adaptation takes several weeks to set in, there is little point in getting into town a week early to try to acclimate to altitude. There is even some evidence that getting in as close to the race as possible--perhaps the night before--may be better than getting in several days before. Going the other way, athletes training at altitude will have difficulty achieving quick leg turnover in high elevation workouts, and may be unprepared for the faster pace of sea level races. These athletes should incorporate sufficient short, fast economy work into their training to adapt to high speed walking.
- 3. Sleep cycles- Nothing is more frustrating than going to sleep a few hours early for a 6:00 am race, only to lie awake all night tossing and turning with anticipation. Short of tranquilizers, the easiest solution is to retire earlier and earlier in the nights leading up to the race to synchronize the body's internal clock. Circadian rhythms should also be synchronized by doing workouts in the weeks before the race at or near the time of day that the race will be contested, adjusting for time-zone differences if

necessary. Many athletes who train regularly in the mornings find difficulty feeling "up" for an evening race. Afternoon racers are often tight and tired for morning races. Train at race time to get in synch!

- 4. Equipment- Racewalkers require very little equipment to compete, but each athlete should be very comfortable with his shoes, shorts, singlet, jogbra, etc. before a race. Always wear your racing shoes and uniform several times in training before competing to make certain that you'll be free of blisters or chafing during the race. Also, make sure that you actually have that equipment with you at the starting line! If you tend to be nervous before traveling to a race, make a list: Shoes, uniform, water bottles, extra pins, etc. should all be packed and ready to go the night before the race. Pin your numbers on your uniform as soon as you get them, and racewalk a bit while wearing them to make certain they are pinned properly. This may save you from frantically re-pinning them at the start line. At race time double tie your shoes and tuck the ends between the tongue and laces. I double tied my shoes before my last 20k, but still raced the last fifteen with an untied shoe because I didn't tuck in my loose ends!
- 5. Food and drink- "Carbo-loading" before major races longer than 90 minutes in duration is advisable. Early researchers suggested a "depletion" phase about a week before the major competition. After a hard glycogen depleting workout the athlete ingested a high-protein, low-carbohydrate diet for two or three days to make muscles "hungry" for glycogen. The athlete then switched over to a high-carbohydrate diet to replete the muscles with glycogen. More recent research has determined that the depletion phase is unnecessary--the athlete need only ingest a high carbohydrate diet in the three days before competition without depleting beforehand. Note: carbo loading does not mean carbo bloating. Carbohydrate percentage should rise, but total caloric intake does not have to increase. Also, make sure that you have experimented with this type of diet several times in training before attempting a "load" before an important race. Drastic changes in diet may lead to gastric distress during competition. In warm races longer than five kilometers, you will need to drink on the go. Practice in training! Make sure that you can grab and drink from a cup without stopping. In longer races a carbohydrate-rich sports drink may be necessary. Determine in training what your stomach will tolerate--some athletes can't tolerate high carbo drinks while walking. Try with several different types of drinks on your longer workouts to see what works best for you.

- Trust Your Training

For better or worse, whatever training you've done in the months before a race will rise to the top on race day--but only if you allow it to. You must have faith in your fitness going into a race--don't undermine your training by hammering yourself in the last week. Additional fitness gains will be minimal, and they will be overshadowed by the detriment of going into the race fatigued. There is such a thing as "training through" less-important races, but doing so will sacrifice your best possible performance in these races in exchange for higher-quality training for future, presumably more important competitions. If you want to perform at your absolute peak now, however, you must be rested. But what does "rested" mean?

- Tapering

Assuming that you have trained rigorously leading up to an important race, a taper is a way of resting both physically and mentally before an important competition without losing any of the fitness gained during the preceding months of training. This does not mean a complete layoff from training. Quite the contrary, an effective taper is characterized by high intensity training, albeit at lower volume than in the previous weeks. This has traditionally meant maintaining much the same schedule in the final two weeks before the race, except with a 1/3 to 1/2 reduction in both the number of intervals, and in total weekly mileage.

Recent research, however, indicates that an even greater reduction in mileage may be beneficial both in the short and the long terms. Owen Anderson, writing in Running Research News, discusses studies with runners who used no taper, a traditional taper, and a taper characterized by drastic reductions in total mileage, and a

limited number of short, high-intensity intervals every day in the week leading up to the race.

These intervals--run at slightly faster than 5 kilometer race pace--amounted to 15% of usual weekly mileage in the final week, with enough easy mileage added to ensure sufficient warm ups and cool downs. For racewalkers training 40 miles per week, this would amount to about six miles of intervals in the week before the race. The bulk of these intervals should be completed in the first few days of the taper, with the number of intervals descending through the week. About 800 meters warm up and 800 meters cool down should be incorporated into each workout, increasing total mileage for the week to 13. This may seem like a ridiculously low mileage total for the week, but remember the primary purpose of the taper: Rest!

The group of runners utilizing the very low mileage, high-intensity taper realized a 6% increase in economy over both the regular taperers and the non-taperers. The average time improvement amounted to 29 seconds over 5 kilometers, with every runner in the group improving. Anderson attributed the increase to both the enhanced rest as well as the benefits of the up-tempo running. What does this mean to the racewalker? Such a taper, coupled with copious stretching and rest should mean enhanced flexibility, more economical technique, increased enzymatic activity and glycogen storage in the leg muscles and quite possibly surprisingly fast race times while doing less work!

A typical taper for a 40 mile per week racewalker is as follows:

- Sunday-Easy 800m warm up with flexibility drills. Stretch. 6 x 400 meters @ between 3 km and 5 km race pace. 800m easy cool down. Stretch any tight spots.
- Monday-Warm up and cool down as above. 5 x 400 meters--again at slightly faster than 5 km pace.
- Tuesday- " " 4 x 400 meters.
- Wednesday- " " 3 x 400 meters.
- Thursday- " " 2 x 400 meters, 1x 200 meters.
- Friday- " " 2 x 400 meters.
- Saturday- " " 1 x 400 meters.
- Sunday-Personal Best Race!

After a disappointing 6th place finish in the national 20 kilometer championships at Knoxville, Tennessee in June I decided to try the "new" taper before my next two races. The results: a strong second place finish at the U.S. Olympic Festival 20 km three weeks later, and a win at the national 10 kilometer championships at Niagara Falls less than one week after that. In both races my legs felt fresher and faster than they had in Knoxville with no apparent loss in fitness.

- Conclusion

Consistently subjecting the body to race-like conditions in training the months before, circadian and environmental acclimatization in the weeks before, and plenty of rest in the days before competition are the keys to reaching your full potential. When tapering, remember that rest, glycogen storage, enzymatic adaptation, and high economy are the goals. Mileage should be reduced to the lowest possible level to ensure that the legs are rested and fully glycogen loaded while still doing a limited number of fast economy intervals. The time for hard mileage has past--the final week should feel very easy, leaving you "chomping" at the bit" for a fast race. If in doubt, always do less! Building endurance and sharpening speed take many months of hard work. Last minute attempts to "catch up" on missed training will only make you tired for the big race.

Once you've done your hard training, the "rest" is easy.

[*Back to homepage](#)
