

Pre-race preparation

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Finding myself at the recent Pan Am Cup as a coach rather than as an athlete for the first time in a number of years, I didn't have my own race to worry about so I had a chance to see how other elite walkers prepare for an important event. The races were held in the south of Brazil—some twelve or more hours by air distant for the US athletes—and many of the races were held in the heat of the day in the early afternoon, which was a departure from the normal state of affairs for most of the walkers. Even at the elite level, mistakes can be made when athletes are forced out of their element. Unfamiliar foods, hotel room layouts and language barriers provide further challenges.

If experienced international athletes can get tripped up by unforeseen snafus, imagine what difficulties may befall you in an out-of-town event. The following are some things to keep in mind when racing away from the security of your hometown:

- **Acclimate:** It is always best to train in similar conditions to those in which you will be competing. If you'll be racing in hot, humid weather, you'll be ill prepared for the event if you train in cool, dry conditions. (Ask me how effective my Mexico City high-altitude training camp was in preparing me for the 90-degrees/90-percent humidity of the Atlanta Olympic Trials...) You can't control the weather, but if you do need to acclimate to warm weather, a winter hat, gloves, and a warm-up jacket and pants can be worn in the last few weeks of training to simulate warm, humid conditions. You could also train on an indoor treadmill with a space heater cranked up in the room.
- **Zoning in:** If you'll be racing overseas or cross-country, you'll need to adjust your sleep times and biological clock to the race locale. If practical, going to bed one hour earlier (if flying east) or later (if heading west) per night for every time zone you will be crossing will help you to pre-adjust to the new time zone. Training at the same time of day as the upcoming race will ensure that your body will be ready to race on the big day. Doing so will also help you to plan appropriate meal times.
- **Keep it familiar:** Try to surround yourself with some of your favorite things from home. Packing familiar foods, a favorite pillow or teddy bear, and perhaps a favorite framed photograph of loved ones for the hotel night stand will help to comfort body and soul.

- **Stay “high”-drated:** New TSA rules make it more difficult to stay hydrated on the plane. Water bottles are not permitted in checked bags through the security check-point, but empty bottles are, and airline terminals are equipped with drinking fountains. I’m not suggesting you illegally carry your own water onto the plane, but I’m not suggesting you don’t do so, either. ‘nuff said.
- **Reconnoiter:** Once on the ground, be sure to visit the race course, preferably at the time of day you will be racing. If possible, do your last taper workouts on the course itself, taking note of how long it takes to get to the course so you’ll know what time to leave the hotel on race morning. If your race is a marathon, it certainly won’t be possible to walk the entire course, but do drive the course if you’re able. Take note of sharp turns where you’ll be able to cut tangents (taking the most direct line from point to point), rough road surfaces, hills, porta-johns and other notable features.

[Photo attached: “Scout out those portajohns the day before the race!”]

- **Be boring:** Stick to your daily routine as much as possible leading up to the race. A little sightseeing won’t hurt, but make sure you don’t overdo it. And please, please, please, no drastic departures from your routine when it comes to food, drink, or anything else you put in your body! Stay hydrated, but don’t overhydrate. Hyponatremia (low sodium levels brought on by drinking too much water—yes, water!) can be a life threatening condition. I know of many recreational athletes, and even some elites—the goofball writing this article included—who have had big problems brought on by H₂O overdoing it. Medications like Ibuprofen (Advil) can exacerbate this condition as well as leading to minor (and in some cases major/life-threatening) intestinal distress. I’ve seen enough athletes have crappy races (if you know what I mean) to cause me to admonish my athletes to never take Ibuprofen before a competition for any reason. And as far as food goes, yes, part of the fun of travel is trying new, local foods. But please wait until AFTER your race to indulge in the monkey-brain paté. Stick with the routine that got you to the race in the first place.

[“Eat familiar foods. (You are familiar with ice cream, aren’t you?)”]

- **Dress for success:** For years I had a recurring nightmare that I showed up for the most important race of my life with two left shoes. And I wish I had been dreaming the two or three times I’ve showed up to races with *no* shoes. As a former coach of mine from Poland would tell me in his inimitable not-quite-broken but not fully functioning either English, “not so professional, son!” Try out all your racing gear, including (and especially!) shoes and socks, several times before traveling to the race. Pack these necessary items in your carry-on bag. This strategy has saved me several times when airlines have lost

my luggage. The one time I did pack my shoes in my stowed luggage, it wound up in Duluth (Dallas? Darfur?) instead of Dulles the day before the World Cup Trials, and I spent three hours the night before the race chasing down a pair of shoes to race in. Needless to say, my back—and nerves—were wrecked and the next morning my feet were chewed up in the race by the brand-new shoes. Upon arrival, unpack as soon as you get settled to make triple sure you have everything you'll need on race day.

[Maybe a photo of the little girl? “Dress appropriately for the conditions.”]

Nothing beats the excitement of an out-of-town race. And the first time you hit the road for an “away” competition, maybe you'll just want to soak up the experience and not worry about how well you perform. But if you're hoping to achieve a peak performance on the road, the best way to do so is to do your homework, practice in similar conditions and keep things as normal as possible. And to top it off, it wouldn't hurt to send a nice plate of that monkey-brain paté to your rival's table, either.

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