How physical therapy helped me run

A 2:37 Boston Marathon

at age 48

I wanted Boston again and I was willing to put in the miles. But as a seasoned physical therapist, I also knew increasing training meant increasing my risk of injury.

By Dan List

Marines are known to be hard-headed. So maybe that’s my excuse.

But why did it take me – a Marine veteran, physical therapist, marathoner and former triathlon aficionado – so long to figure out what should have been obvious?

That, at age 48, I could trim several minutes off my best finish in the Boston Marathon if I only practiced what I preached.

Namely, if I was going to increase my training mileage beyond 100 miles a week, I would need to focus on diet, sleep, core exercises and a physical therapy routine that kept me injury-free.

I had finished 18 marathons and various triathlons during 25 years of road racing. History and conventional wisdom suggested my best times were behind me. I felt otherwise.

I wanted Boston again and I was willing to put in the miles. But as a seasoned physical therapist, I also knew increasing training meant increasing my risk of injury.

The six marathon finishes times prior to my run in Boston 2014 were within two minutes of each other (2:41-2:43). I was confident I could break 2:40. The question was how.

I previously felt it wasn’t necessary to run high mileage in order to run a sub 2:40 marathon. I was putting in 60 to 80 mile weeks and figured that was sufficient.

I honestly believed my training had improved year by year as I approached those six marathons: a little more mileage here, a little more track work there. In reality; however, I was doing the same thing while expecting an improved result.

I reached out to marathon coach Mark Hadley who suggested I was merely “pushing on the edge of the couch” with my efforts. He said what I really needed to do was “push the whole couch across the floor.” That advice stayed with me and changed my training plan for the 2014 Boston Marathon.

I knew I had to do significantly more training than ever before. My plan was to increase weekly mileage into triple digits for the first time ever.

For Boston 2013 I had averaged just over 80 miles per week and ran a 2:42. So I bumped the mileage up by an average

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of 25 miles per week for 2014. My 12-week average was over 105 miles per week and included a four week stretch where I averaged 115 miles (462mi). That meant running every day seven days a week for 12 weeks, and often twice a day. My first day off from running in 2014 was on Easter, April 20, the day before the Boston Marathon.

In order to tolerate the demands of consistent high-milage weeks, I paid greater attention to body maintenance.

**The methods to my madness**

It only made sense to rely on the methods I used in the clinic. Nearly every night I spent 15 to 20 minutes using a foam roller on my calves, quads, and hips, followed by stretching of these muscle groups by using therapy bands. I also used a tennis ball to massage my sore feet and consistently performed core strengthening exercises.

The foam roller is basically self-massage. I lie on the floor and use my body weight on top of the roller to provide pressure. The rolling action of my extremity on the foam roller simulates massage stroking. It’s important to keep treated muscles relaxed, if not limp. If, for example, you’re treating calf muscles, you would move the roller in a head to toe direction using mostly quadricep and hamstring muscles. You can rotate your hips to slight inner/outer areas of your calves. I tend to concentrate on calves, quadriceps, posterior hips, low back and hamstrings in that order.

The same principle applies to the tennis ball for plantar (undersurface) foot muscles. There are four layers of muscle on the undersides of our feet and they get tired and stiff from running every day. I usually sit on my living room couch and cruise the tennis ball in a heel-toe direction along the

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underside of my foot for several minutes. Once again I’m doing my best to keep the foot relaxed to allow for the deepest layers of muscle to be treated.

Once my legs and feet have been loosened up a bit with the foam roller, I’ll gently stretch using a flat rubber therapy band. The band seems to simultaneously stretch muscles over several joints. I tend to perform a slow dynamic (moving) stretch with some static stretching mixed in. Typically I lie on my back on a carpeted floor. Anecdotally, I think the rubber therapy bands work better than a towel roll or belt.

None of this takes an exceptional amount of time, and it makes the next morning’s run much easier.

**Core exercises**

As a former back patient, I’ve learned through trial and error that attention to trunk (core) strengthening makes me less susceptible to sudden onset back pain. For me, I spend about five minutes total per day doing these exercises: crunches, bridging, superman, and pushups. These exercises help me maintain a stable trunk while running, which contributes to a more efficient running stride.

I began running consistently in college while preparing to attend Marine Corps Officer Candidate School. Initially, I was placed under medical scrutiny because of my history as a back patient. I took it upon myself to obtain a perfect score on the USMC physical fitness test, figuring it would resolve any questions about my back health.

My interest in fitness expanded while I was serving as an active duty Marine. I became interested in triathlons and ultimately was selected to represent the USMC at the 1992 Hawaii Ironman Triathlon World Championship.

**Diet**

To train for Boston 2014, I stopped taking supplements and ate a normal omnivore diet. This made me a little more attentive to ensuring I was adequately nourished and hydrated to continue training through the 14-week training cycle.

I ate lots of salads, fish, chicken, eggs and yogurt, and replenished with fluids, carbs and protein soon after my workouts to ensure quick recovery. I try to avoid processed foods. As a general rule, I didn’t let anything “through the door” after dinner.

I avoided alcoholic beverages during the eight weeks before Boston and skipped most desserts (except Gelati Celeste ice cream; there has to be some reward for all that work).

**Sleep**

And lastly, I paid proper attention to sleep. One advantage to running high mileage is that you fall asleep quickly. My general rule was after my girls went to bed and I did all my body maintenance, I hit the sheets. I also reminded myself that growth hormone, important for running improvement, is only released while running and during deep sleep.

The result of all this – increased mileage and training pace, greater attention to diet and sleep, and use of core exercises and physical therapy techniques on a daily basis during training – was a 2:37:36 PR in the 2014 Boston Marathon. My training regimen was justified. Hoo rah!

Now, if I could only break 2:35… ■

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