Marathon - You can do it!

By Jeff Galloway

Jeff Galloway has become famous among runners by writing Galloway's Book on Running, published in 1984 and more than 430,000 copies sold by now. Before becoming a writer and organizer of running clinics, seminars, etc. Galloway had been an Olympic distance runner with a personal best of 28:29 in the 10,000 meters and 2:16:35 in the marathon.

Marathon - You can do it! is Galloway’s second book and clearly addresses fitness and fun runners - although the author sometimes suggests that his program might also work for serious competitive runners.

The basic concept of Galloway’s marathon training program is expressed in the following text excerpt:

“The marathon is primarily an endurance event. It is only secondarily a race and should not be an ordeal. This isn’t to say it’s a walk in the park, but you should be able to finish a marathon, enjoy the sense of achievement it gives you, and look forward to running your next one. The Galloway program will enable you to do just that, all in about six months. The purpose of the program is to build endurance at a steady incremental rate without subjecting your body to stress and injury. Key components are persistence and moderation. The unique factor introduced in this program is the walk break. [...] short walks interspersed with your training runs will prevent you from pushing yourself to exhaustion and injury. At the beginning, the program is very simple (you run just three days a week) [...] In summary you

◆ Walk for 30-60 minutes three days a week
◆ Run for 30 minutes (with walk breaks) twice a week
◆ Take one day off to rest
◆ Take a long run (with walk breaks) once as week (or once every week)."

(p. 2)

So, Galloway's two major aims are (1) to get everybody over the finish line of a marathon, no matter how, and (2) to almost eliminate the chance of injury. Galloway's secrets to achieve this are (1) a low weekly mileage, and (2) the walk breaks.

An additional justification of the walk breaks is Galloway's definition of a marathoner. In his opinion the title of a marathoner should be awarded to those who go the distance under their own power, whether they run, walk, crawl, or tiptoe. Anybody who crosses the finish line has - according to Galloway - joined an elite group (p. 15).

Although the idea that somebody crawling the marathon distance should be awarded the title of a marathoner is a bit strange, to put it mildly, some tricks of definition might sometimes be necessary to motivate people to start exercising. However, Galloway clearly exaggerates his walk-break philosophy when he recommends that even for a time-goal of 2:39 in the marathon 1-minute walk breaks should be taken every 3-5 minutes from the beginning of every long run. And it's sheer nonsense to say that "to conserve his resources, Fabian Roncero took several walk breaks during his victory in the Rotterdam Marathon in 1998." (p. 15) The facts are that after passing the 25 km mark in 1:14:55, Roncero ran (not walked!) the next two 5 km splits in 14:33 and 15:10, respectively. At km 39 and 40 he was forced to interrupt his run because of muscle cramps but was able to resume running and reach the finish line in 2 hours, 7 minutes, and 26 seconds. So, his breaks were not walk breaks as recommended by Galloway, but they were accidents, which Roncero would rather have avoided.

It goes without saying that the goal of every marathon runner is not just reaching the finish line, but to do so running and if possible by running continuously without any walk breaks. It is also clear that regeneration and relaxation are important elements of all marathon training programs, but they should not be the main ingredients.

As far as competitive marathoning is concerned, people should not so much listen to Galloway but rather to serious running experts like Tim Noakes. According to Noakes, the only thing that slow training does for a runner is make him or her a slower runner. People forget that it’s not the heart which limits performance in the marathon. Fatigue occurs in the leg muscles, not the cardiovascular system, and the way to make the leg muscles more impervious to fatigue is
not to slog through a lot of slow miles. To make the leg muscles fatigue-resistant, one has got to stress them by training fairly intensely. Marathon runners profit from limiting mileage to 60-70 miles per week and increasing the intensity of their training. The point is that one can’t learn to run fast in the marathon by doing a lot of slow mileage in practice. (See O. Anderson: “Bubble-burster stalks meeting rooms at recent ACSM convention, advocates unique training for marathon runners,” in: Running Research News, 6 (1990), 4, pp. 1, 3-6) By the way, walk breaks don’t play any role in Tim Noakes’ concept of competitive marathon training!

Not only in the training sections, but in the nutrition parts, too, Galloway says things which provoke critical comments. For example, he recommends that at the day of the competition before the race marathoners should “drink four to six ounces of water every hour until you hear sloshing in your stomach. Whenever the sloshing stops, start the drinking again. It’s always better to have water in your stomach, or in your system, than to suffer the devastating effects of severe dehydration and heat disease.” This is true to only a limited extent because Galloway completely forgets to tell that total elimination of sodium prior and during the race, along with continual ingestion of water can lead to hyponatremia. Hyponatremia occurs when the body becomes “flooded” with water, thereby diluting the electrolytes and causing an imbalance. In severe cases the person can develop seizures and drop into a coma. According to Jim Ferstle (“Hyponatremia: a new kind of drinking problem,” in: Road Race Management (July 2002), 236, pp. 1-3, 6) cases of hyponatremia at road races have occurred predominantly in marathons among people finishing in four hours or slower. The slower runners are on the course for a long time; tend to slow down enough - or stop - at aid stations to actually drink from the cup, rather than just grabbing a couple of small gulps while trying not to break stride; and often carry their own fluid supply to sustain them between water stops. The result is a significantly increased incidence of hyponatremia, which is beginning to cause physicians to reconsider the time-tested hydration advice for runners on race courses for more than four hours. Rather, race medical personnel are beginning to focus on cautioning runners not to drink too much.

Galloway’s storytelling, repetitive style tends to be tedious and sometimes makes it very hard to access the information, some of which – after all – might be useful for marathon beginners. Some really silly passages will almost certainly deter serious runners. One example my suffice. Galloway presents some so-called dirty tricks which shall prevent exhausted marathon runners from dropping out of the race. One of these tricks is an imaginative idea which he calls “ball-bearing atoms”: “This is a high-tech right-brain invention that will send you gliding to the finish. As the legs lose their resilience near the finish, you can shake off from your hair millions of atoms that normally act to keep it shiny. As the atoms drop onto your feet, you’ll find that you don’t need to stretch out your stride any more. You glide better through the air and stay more efficient by staying closer to the ground. When you’re losing this effect, shake your hair again. Balding people, like myself, will always appreciate some strategic head shakes from others.” (p. 92)

To sum it up then, this is a book for absolute marathon beginners who need somebody to tell them how wonderful they are if they get to the finish line of a marathon, no matter how. However, for serious, competitive runners reading this book is a waste of time. For them there are much better books around.

Jeff Galloway
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Reviewed by Jürgen Schiffer