



Why—and How—You Should Run Your Best 13.1 Right Now



The marathon distance often holds all the glory—whether it's Eliud Kipchoge attempting to break the two-hour barrier or everyday runners working toward the finish lines of all six World Marathon Majors. But 2020 proved how exciting the half marathon really is. Records were still shattered in the throes of a global pandemic: Ethiopia's Ababel Yeshaneh ran the fastest women's 13.1 in history, winning the Ras Al Khaimah Half, and Kibiwott Kandie of Kenya broke the men's half record in

Valencia. Along with them, pros across the globe ran down personal bests during rare racing opportunities. You can argue that 26.2 miles is more brag-worthy, but a greater number of runners target the half marathon. In fact, 39 percent of runners say the half is their favorite distance compared with just 12 percent who favor the marathon, according to a 2020 National Runner Survey from Running USA. Here's why tackling the half-marathon distance might be one of the smartest

Heather Knight Pech (above), 58, ran a PR of 1:27:24 (6:40-mile pace) at the Trials of Miles half marathon last November.



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FROM
BETHLEHEM,
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POSTRUN
CRAVING
CHOCOLATE
MILK AFTER
A WORKOUT.
COFFEE AFTER
EVERY RUN

GO-TO
RECOVERY
METHOD
PIGEON OR
CHILD'S POSE

CREDENTIALS
FORMER
NUTRITION AND
TRAINING EDITOR
FOR *RUNNER'S*
WORLD, AUTHOR,
RUNNER'S WORLD
VEGETARIAN
COOKBOOK

CAN'T TRAIN
WITHOUT
THULE DOUBLE
STROLLER—PUSH-
ING 100 POUNDS
(UPHILL) IS A
BONUS WORKOUT.

ADVICE FOR MOTIVATION
GETTING BETTER DOESN'T JUST
HAPPEN—YOU HAVE TO WORK AT IT.

FAVORITE 13.1 I RAN-WALKED
THE 2012 MORE/FITNESS HALF
MARATHON WITH MY MOM. AND TOGETHER
WE CROSSED HER FIRST HALF FINISH LINE.

goals to work toward right now—whether it's at an in-person race or a virtual event.

It's not a time suck
Marathon training can feel like a full-time job. Unless you're a pro runner, that means cramming in lots of miles when you're not working, parenting, and trying to manage life. Training for a half marathon? It's roughly 60 percent of marathon training, says Hiruni Wijayaratne, half-marathon record holder (1:13:10) for Sri Lanka and a coach with Runcoach, an online race training and tracking platform. Not only are half marathons easier on your schedule, but you won't burn through

shoes due to heavy mileage, or have to get those aches worked out with regular massage, Wijayaratne says. "The half marathon offers the challenge of long distance without the time commitment," adds Heather Knight Pech, 58, a McKirdy Trained coach who set her 13.1 PR (1:27:24) at the small Trials of Miles half marathon in New York last November. She points out that for the average runner, long runs might last 90 minutes to two hours for half training, compared to marathon long runs of two or three hours. "The bulk of half-marathon training takes about 45 to 60 minutes," she says. And that makes recovery faster, too.

It's less stress
Running during a pandemic can help runners decompress. But living through a pandemic takes an additional toll on your mental and physical health, says David Tolin, Ph.D., director of the Anxiety Disorders Center at the Hartford Healthcare Institute of Living. When your mental and physical health aren't up to snuff, there's a good chance your running performance could suffer, whether that's due to lack of motivation or due to injury.

Tolin explains that when the body is under stress, it goes into fight-or-flight mode. Stress, he says, triggers the release of adrenaline and cortisol—chemicals that help the body prepare for threat. When the threat passes, Tolin says, those hormones usually return to normal. However, there are times—during a pandemic, for example—when that stress becomes chronic.

"When those chemicals remain at high levels in the body, ultimately, they have adverse effects," he says, including problems with heart health and the immune system.

Running is unlikely to suppress the immune system, says exercise physiologist James Turner, Ph.D., a senior lecturer at the University of Bath in the U.K. who specializes in immunobiology. But pushing your limits—too much mileage if pain won't go away, for example—when your

body is already under so much stress could lead to illness, says Caroline Jouhourian, M.D., a gastroenterologist at Lowell General Hospital in Lowell, Massachusetts, and an associate at Integrated Gastroenterology Consultants of Greater Lowell. "It's a fine line and one that some people don't recognize until they're injured or become sick," Jouhourian, a runner, says.

It's still a challenge
"This pandemic has really undone quite a few of my athletes, and most want to have a race on the calendar (any race)," Pech says. While less invasive, half-marathon training still requires endurance and speed, Pech says, which often puts runners outside their comfort zone. After all, in order to run a half well, you need to push your effort and pace for a full 13.1 miles.

"The goal of half-marathon training is to extend your stamina at threshold intensity, which is a comfortably hard effort," she says. That means you'll have to tackle long runs and speed with a mix of threshold and interval intensity. This will advance your threshold pace and extend the time you can hold it.

On the mental side, Wijayaratne points out that the average runner will spend roughly two hours on their feet over the course of a half marathon. "Most people don't do tasks on their feet for that much time," she says. "You have to trick yourself

to stay alert and upright for that long." And you still have to push through the pain of running a long distance—it's just over more quickly than a marathon. "Like the marathon, you're going to be working on patience, on holding off glycogen depletion and dehydration," Pech says. "The last three to five miles of a half marathon is like the back half of a marathon—it's a critical time to execute mental strength with visualizations and positive self-talk."

It gets you ready for 26.2
The beauty of targeting 13.1 is once you have the foundation for that distance built, you can add mileage to focus on a marathon or reduce mileage to target a 10K or 5K.

"If you're in solid half-marathon shape at any given time, you can, over the course of four to eight weeks, [prepare to] race a marathon pretty well," Pech says. And you may only need four weeks to sharpen your speed for a 10K.

Wijayaratne and her team at Runcoach prescribe adding speedwork—intervals as short as 200 to 400 meters—to their clients' half-marathon training to improve running efficiency.

"That turnover and good cadence will help you become a better runner at long distances," Wijayaratne says. "Half-marathon training touches both sides of the spectrum: You're working your engine [cardio] and your legs." 🏃

GO-TO 13.1 WORKOUTS

Start each session with a proper warmup, including dynamic drills.
Early in Training: A favorite of Hiruni

Wijayaratne, run 6x1-mile repeats at your goal half-marathon pace, with 2 minutes standing rest between each mile. Seasoned runners can attempt 8x1-mile repeats.
Race Day Prep: Heather Knight Pech suggests this

workout two weeks before race day. Run 3x2 miles at threshold or half-marathon pace, with 1-mile jog or walk recovery. Seasoned runners can attempt 3x3 miles at threshold or half pace, with a half mile or 1-mile jog recovery.