

# Start Smart

## Break the habit of going out too fast

By Richard A. Lovett

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At the Olympic trials in June, Amy Begley had a problem. Even if she finished in the top three of the 10,000m, she wouldn't go to Beijing unless she also met the Olympic "A" standard of 31:45, nearly 15 seconds faster than her PR. But it was a warm night, and the pack started slowly.

Under instructions from her coach not to try to front-run the first half of the race, Begley forced herself to hold back, even as the 5K split came in at 16:10. Then the race began to speed up, and so did Begley. Drawing on the energy she'd saved in the first half, she ran the second half in 15:33, finishing third in 31:43.7 and scoring a trip to Beijing.

Begley, of course, is an elite runner. But Stephanie Matson, a 27-year-old runner from Portland, Ore., did something similar in this year's Boston Marathon. Matson wanted to PR, but Boston, with its downhill start, is a course notorious for sucking runners out too fast, then crushing them later on. So she started conservatively, running 21:20 for the first 5K. With each consecutive 5K she sped up, even as the course flattened, clocking splits of 21:03, 20:57, 20:56, slowing a bit in the Newton Hills, then hitting her fastest times in the final miles. The result: 2:58:51, a 9-minute PR.

So, if holding back at the start works, why don't more of us do it?

Partly that's because we've heard too many high school and college coaches tell their runners not to lose contact with whomever they're trying to beat. Once you get dumped, that thinking goes, you're finished. And even if you have no chance of winning, it's easy for that mentality to infuse your thinking.

But that whole line of thinking is a myth, says Jeff Simons, a sports psychologist at California State University, East Bay. Sure, you're not going to catch back up if the reason you dropped back was that the pace was too fast and you wore yourself out. But what if the people you're chasing are also going too fast? Or for that matter, why should their optimal strategy be the same as yours?

"The intelligent runner can do exceedingly well staying loose and relaxed early on, then really hitting the tough parts hard when everybody else is starting to gas," says Simons, who's worked with elite and Olympic athletes for many years.

Another problem is that we just don't trust the race plan. "Somehow we imagine that we have to do something different than we planned in order to do something special," Simons says.

Failure can also be self-reinforcing, especially for marathoners. I've known a lot of runners who, having faded before in the second halves of their races, intentionally go out fast, wanting to have time "in the bank" once the slowdown begins.

But understandable as that sounds, it's counterproductive. "You don't hear elites saying, 'I'm going to run 2:08 [for a marathon], so I'm going to run 1:00 for the first half, and that gives me 68 minutes to come in,'" Simons says.

Even if we really believe in the plan, it's still easy to screw up. In part, that's because the race setting skews our perception of pace. "When we're excited, the world speeds up. In order for us to feel normal, we speed up too," Simons says. "We're also more rested than in training. So your perception is poor because you say, 'This doesn't hurt very much.' This happens to marathoners

all the time."

Another problem is that it's easy to get distracted. We wind up paying too much attention to the runners around us and forget to concentrate on ourselves. Says Simons: "You run with poor form, let your heart rate and respiration rate go up without checking, and wonder why, suddenly, you're gasping for breath."

Bob Williams, a coach in Portland, Ore., adds another factor: inability to manage adrenaline. "Adrenaline is a drug," he says. "It is extremely difficult to control, particularly for athletes who don't have a lot of confidence."

The adrenaline-induced desire to bolt out is also complicated by something track coaches call "free energy." You could think of this energy as pre-aerobic: It comes from instant-energy molecules (adenosine triphosphate and phosphocreatine) already stored in your cells, ready to use. Because it comes with no effect on your aerobic systems, it really is free, if you choose to use it, Williams says. "There is no fatigue to it."

But it's only good for a few seconds -- perhaps 50 to 100 meters. That makes it useful for securing the inside lane on the track, or for not getting trampled at the start of big road races. But it's also a trap. "Most people use it, but they keep going," Williams says. "They forget they have to back off."

So how do you keep all of this under control? "That's easy when your coach is there every 400 meters telling you not to lead," Begley says with a laugh.

But of course, that doesn't work in road races.

"Sometimes, you can pick someone that you know runs a little slower than you do and just pace off them for the first mile or so," she says.

You can also try to get early splits, either by previewing the course and attempting to measure your own landmarks, 400 or 800 meters out, or (if you're running where the streets are laid out in a rectangular grid) by finding out how many blocks there are to a mile. Also important is to practice your goal pace in training. "[You] have to practice and practice and practice," Williams says. "Focus on the feel."

In the race, Simons adds, you need to look for true signals of your pace, rather than those that might be warped by adrenaline. Things to pay attention to are the physical sensation of moving over the ground, the feel of your stride, and your breathing. "That's getting you in touch with what's really happening," he says. And, of course, it's easier to read these signals if you're not too nervous. "Learning to be calm before a race is important," Williams says.

It sounds tough, and it isn't easy. But when you've managed to do it once, the feeling of running a well-paced race is addictive. When runners make the breakthrough, Williams says, they feel so much happier and so much better about their races that many never revert to their old habits.