



STAGE PERFORMANCE

Multi-day races aren't as popular in running as they are in cycling. Why not? Are we just not as tough as our two-wheeled friends?

David Bradford reflects on a stage race experience of his own, and weighs up the allure versus the agony of contests with several parts

14 hours or so (before the next race) as a critical recovery stage, doing everything you can to replace fluids, cram in useful calories, and reduce joint inflammation and muscle soreness.

Keep your thirst quenched at all times, because even a small drop in hydration may equate to a fall in blood volume, making it harder for your cardiovascular system to transport oxygen to your muscles - not good news for your running. For the same reason, don't over-indulge in alcoholic drinks during the evenings. Too much alcohol not only leads to dehydration but also disrupts sleep. Proper recovery demands quality kipping; an uninterrupted seven to eight hours is ideal for most people. Despite the temptation of the inexpensive local wine in Cyprus, we did our best to limit ourselves to a glass or two each night - tactically holding back until after the event had finished - and kept to our normal sleeping routines.

NUTRITION ADVICE

You will need to eat more than normal over the course of a multi-day event, to prevent your body's glycogen stores from running low. If you run short on glycogen, your blood glucose level will fall, you'll feel tired and will ultimately 'hit the wall'. Carbohydrate intake is crucial for energy. In each race, you will burn approximately 1kcal per kilo of bodyweight per kilometre. So, after the half marathon in the Cyprus Challenge, I needed to find an extra 1,500kcal, on top of my usual daily requirement. Thank goodness for sweet, doughy Cypriot desserts, especially my favourite: kataifi - a syrup-drenched roll of shredded pastry. Feasting on carb-rich fodder is useful (and fun), but overindulging is best avoided, as it may cause stomach trouble in the next day's race, and carbs should be combined with protein.

"Grazing - eating little and often - is recommended to avoid overloading the gut and to maximise calorie intake," advises Tiller. "Aim to consume a mixture of carbohydrate, protein and fat, because they're all required in the body for different purposes. Most important are complex carbs to replace glycogen lost during the day, and protein for muscle repair."

REST IS VITAL

If you're racing in a foreign country, you may be tempted to go walking or sightseeing during 'free time' between stages, but additional load-bearing exercise is best avoided. If you want to run at your best, you need proper rest, which means getting the weight off your feet and conserving energy. Our beachside venue in Cyprus provided an ideal recovery zone; we were able spend our post-race afternoons relaxing on sunbeds and taking recuperative dips in the sea.

"Swimming or hydrotherapy exercise is great," confirms Tiller. "The water pressure induces vascular (blood vessel) compression which aids recovery by stimulating blood-flow, which helps remove waste products and muscle debris."

The right preparation, nutrition and recovery are important, but they don't guarantee you'll get to the end of a stage race having done your absolute best. Why not? Because multi-day events demand something extra: not just the willingness to keep going one day after another, but the determination to turn difficulty to your favour. After the first day, you can forget about tapering and race-freshness; you will develop aches, muscle stiffness and fatigue. You will need the never-say-die work ethic of a Tour de France cyclist, thinking beyond the present day's exertion and coaxing your body into doing more than you ever realised it could. "In multi-day events, the psychological factor is especially significant," says Tiller. "We have to break free from the limitations we'd previously imposed on our performances - if you thought a half-marathon was tough, for instance, you'll need to overcome a mental barrier to believe you can race on several consecutive days."

According to Tiller, we are natural born multi-day survivors: "We haven't changed a great deal, genetically, since our ancestors were hunting and gathering for their food, on foot across the plains of Africa, which they did every day to survive. Our bodies are designed to sustain prolonged activity, and that's why, given the right attitude and training, anybody is capable of taking on a gruelling, multi-stage event."

If your preparation is right and your mind is willing, your body will almost always obey and endure. You're just an entry form away...

JOHN LOWDEN: 'I LOVE THE BANTER'

Stage-racing veteran John Lowden, 55, has competed in the Cyprus Challenge and the Isle of Wight Fell Series, where he still holds the V40 record on stage one, St Boniface Fell (17.58, 2003)

What's special about stage races?

"There always seems to be a good atmosphere and a real buzz around these events. Even if you have a poor race, you can still try to improve in the next one - even a small improvement is satisfying. Each stage is different, so it's not necessarily the same guy who wins each stage, which adds to the intrigue. I also enjoy the banter with other runners I've never met before... I tell them I was only taking it easy, holding back for the next stage!"

Any advice for people considering a multi-day event?

"The most difficult part is deciding how hard to run each stage and how much to 'leave in the tank' for the next stage. From my experience, I have had my best results when running each stage at approximately 99 per cent of normal race pace. Whenever I've tried to hold more back for the next stage, it hasn't helped."

How tough have you found stage races?

"I reckon the Isle of Wight Fell Series is harder than any marathon I've done - all three races involve a really steep climb

and then a steep descent back to the town. After racing on Saturday morning and Saturday afternoon, you can hardly even walk when you get up on Sunday morning, yet we still all force ourselves to run a 13-mile fell race."

How do you fare as an older runner?

"I guess stage races favour the younger chaps, as older runners need more recovery - hence my appalling 39 minute 10k at Paphos [in the Cyprus Challenge, 2010]! Nonetheless, I'm looking forward to doing more of them."



The gruelling hill stage



What better way to recover from a stage than a dip in the sea!