

SEPTEMBER 27, 2014



Matt Ostrander, aka "Coach O"

How to Train for the Birkie Trail Run Marathon and Half Marathon

Part 3 of a 3-Part Series

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“Race Day Prep and Strategies”

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SEPTEMBER 27, 2014

<http://www.birkie.com/run/events/birkie-trail-run>

Note: If you plan to run the marathon course or parts of it before the event, please take the Course Description and the map from the [Birkie Trail Run](#) with you. The course is marked in some areas—like turns onto the singletrack sections—with pink arrows, but it is not yet completely marked as it will be on race day. Enjoy!



I have a lot of information to convey in this article, so I'll make it easier for you by breaking it into bite-size subtopics. If you don't have time to read the whole thing, skim for the parts you're concerned about.

What to Eat and Drink

This section is broken down into before, during, and after the race.

Before the Race

There's nothing to be gained by obsessing over your diet for days before the race. Enjoy a healthy, well-balanced diet right up until the night before the race. I'm sure you know that means lots of fruits and vegetables; lean meats supplemented by other protein sources such as nuts, beans, and soy; plenty of whole-grain carbohydrates, an abundance of water and water-based beverages (limiting sugar intake); and as little processed food as possible.

For a marathon or half-marathon, I do put some stock in the old idea of carbo-loading the night before: a plate of spaghetti is the old standby, but a foot-long sub sandwich is just as good. Avoid greasy or fatty foods, and dairy products, both the night before and the morning of

the race. If you feel like snacking the day before, pretzels are a good choice: they will top off your salt stores without overdoing it, and they feature simple carbohydrates.

On race morning, your focus should be on simple, easily-digested carbohydrates and fluids. For a marathon or ultra, I never vary from this menu: a cinnamon-raisin bagel (dry, untoasted), a quart of orange Gatorade, and a banana. If I need more calories before race time, I'll add another banana or another bagel. You don't have to eat what I eat—the idea is to experiment on practice runs and then stick with what works for you. Stop eating 90 minutes before race time, or longer if you have a sensitive stomach. Stop drinking 45 minutes before race time, or 60 minutes if you are prone to sideaches when you run. Other good pre-race choices are toast with jelly (no butter), or oatmeal (brown sugar, cinnamon sugar, canned peaches, and/or raisins are all OK; butter and milk are not). If you are a habitual coffee drinker, go ahead and have a cup, but one is plenty.

During the Race

You should be able to find what you need at the aid stations. Heed energy drink and water will be available at all aid stations, and GU gels will be available at the aid stations. If you want something more solid, by all means bring it. But, only eat foods that you have tried in practice and tolerated well.

After the Race

Begin rehydrating immediately, with water or a sports drink. Do not start celebrating with alcoholic beverages until your pee is running clear again. Within twenty minutes of finishing, eat a mix of protein and carbohydrates. There are fancy \$3 bars that will do this, but I prefer a peanut butter and jelly sandwich. Another refreshing choice is lowfat yogurt with granola in it.

Sleep

Don't worry about it. Your sleep two nights before the race is more important than the night before. On the eve of one Grandma's Marathon (for which I had foolishly neglected to reserve lodging), I "slept" in the back seat of a Ford Tempo, with seagulls screaming around me all night long. I had a great race. It's more important to get up early and not be rushed on race morning, than to sleep in and be frantic on race day.

What to Wear

I'd suggest these items, but try them in your long runs before race day:

- Relatively lightweight trail shoes, but not racing shoes. If you usually run with orthotics, special insoles, or arch supports, do not try to lighten things on race day by taking them out.
- Moisture-managing socks made of a synthetic material, such as Ironman socks by Wigwam. I've gone for 60-mile workouts in these socks and not gotten a single blister.
- Shorts that you have run in and know that you like

- A light-colored, synthetic, moisture-wicking top
- A light-colored cap
- Your race bib
- Maybe a watch, if you're into that
- Vaseline or Body Glide, on areas where you are prone to chafe. If you don't know where those areas are, email me or ask your gym teacher. I prefer Body Glide because it lasts longer and doesn't stain your clothes.
- Do not wear an iPod or similar device, for about six good reasons.

Stretching and Warm-Up

Many running coaches are steering runners away from static stretches, especially on race day. They advocate replacing your stretching with a lengthier warm-up, or with dynamic stretches. This is good thinking for a 400m runner, or a miler, but there's no reason why a marathoner or half-marathoner shouldn't do her favorite static stretches before the race. These stretches will make your muscles slightly less elastic in the first mile of the race, but they will also make your muscles less prone to cramping or tearing.

If you feel muscles knotting up during the race, stop and stretch them out. It will add a minute to your time, but a full-fledged leg cramp will add a heck of a lot more. (If you're often plagued by leg cramps, you could be suffering from an electrolyte deficiency. This is especially likely if you notice a lot of salt on your skin or clothing after a long run. You should try an electrolyte supplement like Succeed! S-Caps—they have worked wonders for me, enabling me to go 100 miles on a hot day without a single cramp.)

Pace and Effort Level

For the most part, keep your effort level just under your anaerobic threshold (AT). If you feel your breathing begin to accelerate, especially if it's accompanied by suddenly heavy legs, ease off. Half-marathoners who have done sufficient mileage and speed work can run their whole race right at their AT; marathoners, and half-marathoners who are less well-prepared, should stay below their threshold. Your breathing/stride pattern should be 3/2 (three steps for the inhale, two for the exhale) or 2/2 (two steps for the inhale, two for the exhale). Uphills will temporarily speed up your breathing pattern, but you should recover quickly.

Don't pass people on the uphill. Respect the Birkie hills. There are lots of them, and some are quite steep. As I said in an earlier article, if your pace on an uphill feels little faster than a walk, you're better off walking. The winners of the marathon and half-marathon will probably run every uphill, but they are prepared for that. Just don't forget that you have to start going fast again as soon as you crest the hill—don't lollygag. It's like a bike race that way: whoever can pop back into a high gear the fastest gets a real jump on the competition.

On the flats, keep your musculature relaxed and your stride rate quick. On downhill, shoot for the maximum safe speed. This means that you'll have to rein it in on the initial, steep part of the downslope, but you can let it out once the grade lessens. This will give you a bolus of speed across that next flat.

Two Last Pace Tips:

1) Don't judge your pace or how your race is going by how you feel in the middle of an uphill—you're supposed to feel crappy there. 2) If you're looking for a place where it's safe to start pushing it a little harder, I'd say when you exit the last singletrack at High Point. You have about five and a half miles to go at that point, and it's mostly downhill. (There are a few sizeable uphill left, though... don't go nuts.)

Heat

If Mother Nature throws anything serious at you on race day, it's likely to be heat. (Don't worry about rain—that just makes a trail run more fun.) The best defense to heat is to be acclimated to it ahead of time. Run in heat when you can, before race day. Just be sure to do short loops, close to home, and to hydrate well. Let someone know where you're going and when you'll be back. During the race, cope with the heat by the three-cup method at each aid station: drink a cup of Heed, drink a cup of water, and pour a cup of water over your head.

If you feel overheated, cold water on your neck, forearms, face, and feet can help—you're looking for the body parts with the most blood carried near the surface. If you feel dizzy or nauseated, if your skin gets hot and dry, or if you feel a headache, it's time to stop running and report your symptoms to someone. Heat stress can progress to heat exhaustion and heat stroke very quickly, and sometimes the runner is the last one to know what happened. As they say at ultras, "If you're not sure you can make it to the next aid station, don't leave this aid station."

Last Words

It will be fun. Just think about all the training you've done to get ready, and don't forget to enjoy the experience. Trail marathons are filled with friendly, outgoing, supportive people, and nothing in the Midwest beats the beauty of the Birkie Trail in autumn.

If you have any questions about running the Birkie Trail or these race day tips, feel free to email me at mathewostrander1@gmail.com. See you on the trail!

Heading out to scout the course this summer? The map of the course on the Birkie website gives you a good overall picture of the course, but if you're going to try the course on your own before race day, I recommend the map at this page:

<http://www.cambatrails.org/page/show/1050115-cable-area-silent-sports-map>. The area bounded by Timber Trail Road on the south, Spider Lake Fire Lane on the east, McNaught Road on the north, and Randysek Road on the west is an area where it's easy to mistake a snowshoe trail for a bike trail, or the Classic Trail for the Skate Trail. When I go up there alone, I carry the Silent Sports map with me on my phone. You should also be aware that neither the Boedecker Road warming hut nor the Fire Tower warming hut offers water—you must carry what you will need, plus a little extra.

Questions? If you have any other questions about the course, you can email me at mathewostrander1@gmail.com, or you can contact Chris Campbell (the Birkie Trail Manager who designed it) at trail@birkie.com. I'll see you in September!

About the Author

Matt Ostrander is a local trail runner (ultrarunner!). In 2013 alone he placed 22nd overall in the Birkie marathon in addition to being 1st in his age-class. This guy knows how to run! High school cross country coach and English teacher, and all-around-great-guy, Ostrander took off on the Birkie Trail to give everyone a detailed description of the all-new Birkie Trail Run marathon and marathon relay course. He also has some expert advice on those Birkie hills, overall training strategy, and race-day prep. The article above is 1 of his 3 articles for the 2014 Birkie Trail Run on Sept. 27. Check [birkie.com](http://www.birkie.com) for his complete series as it is posted - <http://www.birkie.com/run/events/birkie-trail-run>.