

Simple Tactics for Successful Racing

Shave seconds off your PR or surge past your rival with these tips

By Greg McMillan, M.S.
As featured in the December 2009 issue of Running Times Magazine

Smart racing equals fast racing. As a competitive runner, you want to run fast and you want to beat your rivals. Below, I've listed eight simple, yet effective strategies for doing both.

1) Run the tangents

I'm always surprised when I race at how many runners don't run the tangents -- the shortest distance through the race route. In any race, running the tangents can shave several seconds from your time. The key is to look up and be aware of what's ahead. On curving roads, don't snake your way along like the yellow centerline. Instead, run a straight line from inside corner to inside corner using the entire running route (the closed lane of the road or the full road) to run the shortest distance possible. A little awareness of the course as you race it can be very beneficial to your final time.



2) Pass with authority

In high school, my cross country coach told us to pass with authority. When passing a competitor in any race, don't just ease by them; fly by them! Make them think you're running so well that there's no need to try to stay with you. You'll crush their spirit and thereby gain more advantage than just the distance between the two of you. You even want to sneak up on them by hanging back a few strides to recover before you attack.

3) Pass wide

Along with passing with authority, take a tip from the Tour de France. In cycling, when a rider makes a move to break away, he swings wide (often to the other side of the road) as he hits the accelerator. I've used this successfully in the past, especially on straight roads where moving to one side doesn't take extra distance. Every runner is taught to latch on when being passed but latching on to someone on the other side of the road is hard to do, and often they don't even give chase. Don't look at them -- just go hard and get a gap.

4) Surge early and often

Surging has become standard operating procedure in championship races like the Olympics -- thanks largely to Kenyan John Ngugi, who in 1988 threw in a 60-second lap early in the 5,000m final. It took everyone by surprise except for Ngugi. He had trained to surge hard, recover, and then surge again -- training that was completely foreign to the other runners. He established a big gap that would never be made up and he went on to win Olympic gold. In most races -- especially on the roads and in cross country -- gaps early in the race often are maintained through the race. Don't be afraid to throw in a surge early in the race to get a gap on a competitor. Then, throw in another surge shortly after the first one. The gap you get may be all you need to beat your rival.

5) Sneak a peek

In a tight race where victory or age-group awards are on the line, it's important to know how your competitors are doing. But, you don't want to look back as they may see this as a sign that you're tired. Instead, sneak a peek as you round corners. Don't turn your head much but just turn slightly to catch a quick glance behind. Your competitors will never be the wiser but you'll get valuable information that can help you with your tactics for the remainder of the race.

6) Steal their move

At the Osaka Marathon in the mid-1980s, Lorraine Moller and Lisa Martin were locked in a fierce duel. Moller sensed that Martin was about to make a bid for victory. Instead of waiting on the move, Moller "stole it," a tactic she learned as a younger runner. Stealing your competitor's move puts you in control and confuses them. Moller went on to victory, and you can too. The next time you sense a competitor about to pass you or surge, steal their move. Surge away and make them respond. You'll find it often takes the impetus to pass away from them and they become followers rather than attackers.

7) Surge on corners

Corners are a great place to gain an advantage. Most runners slow as they take turns. Capitalize on this by surging into, through and out of every corner. This can help you get a few steps on a competitor, which may make the difference in the finish. Keep your cadence fast and your stride short and simply blast through the corners. It forces your competitors to have to change gears to catch you and when they're tired, changing gears is the last thing they want to do. Work on surging through corners in practice so it becomes second nature in races.

8) Surge at the top and bottom of each hill

A common (and appropriate) strategy is to surge over the top of the hill while your rivals relax and slow. It's also a great idea to surge at the bottom of every hill. Many runners relax at the bottom of hills. It's only natural as you return to your flat running pace and rhythm. Savvy racers, however, take advantage of this by carrying the downhill momentum onto the flat and surging at the

bottom of the hill. It takes your competitors by surprise and gives you an advantage, and the lead.

GREG MCMILLAN is an exercise physiologist and USATF-certified coach who helps runners via his website mcmillanrunning.com.

Copyright © 2009 Running Times Magazine - All Rights Reserved.