



**HOW FAST
COULD YOU
RUN...
HOW FAR
COULD YOU
GO...
IF YOU TOOK
OFF YOUR
TRACKER AND
RAN
FREE?**

Experts, coaches, and marathoners make the case for slipping on just your sneaks and leaving metrics (and other racers!) in the dust.

BY MICHAEL EASTER



Your race bib flutters as your feet pound the pavement in perfect cadence.

You glance down at your GPS watch. 9:08. The precise pace you need to maintain if you're going to complete this half-marathon in your goal time of under two hours.

Just three miles to go when you hit a tough hill. Despite raucous cheers from spectators flanking the route, your pace falters [9:28]. But then, salvation: a downhill [8:48]. You rush toward the finish line, skipping the celebratory fist pump to stop your watch, as you don't want to be a second late. You anxiously inspect the screen. 1:59:42. Yes! Cloud. Nine.



Not to vaporize that cumulus accomplishment, but Q: What would your race time be if you weren't hyper-connected to that big ol' mobile cloud in the sky? Could you have crossed the finish line in 1:55...1:50... maybe even 1:45?

As many coaches see it, yes. Tracking may help you hit your goal, but it can also stop you from running your best race. Why? Because it becomes *all* about staying on pace. "We see it all the time with races," says ultramarathoner Alec Blenis, a coach at Complete Human Performance. "Where a runner will feel fantastic and could run faster but stays on pace. Or they'll be running faster than their goal pace, then they'll check their watch and slow down to be on pace." Blenis is part of a growing faction of experts who claim we over-rely on electronic feedback.

WITHOUT A TRACE

The whole concept of running "naked" might seem uncomfortable, even alarming. After all, more than half of runners now wear fitness watches and trackers that quantify every step, mile, and heartbeat. And, of course, that technology has enhanced much of our active lives—the everyday runner has become more knowledgeable, not to mention more motivated. But anecdotal and science-backed research has found that wearing trackers on every run has bred a robotic approach that can be helpful when training for a race but may ultimately weaken our connection to crucial internal cues and even dampen the stress-busting perks of the workout itself.

Former elite marathoner and current run coach Kim Jones is a perfect case study on how being a Luddite could lift your performance. Now 59, she completed her first marathon in Honolulu in 1984—long before the tech boom had infiltrated the sport. "I just pushed it as hard as I could the

entire way," she says. Her old-school strategy worked: Jones hit the halfway mark in 1:24:24—a 6:26-minute-per-mile pace—and finished in 2:48:48, registering mathematically perfect splits. (Even splits, or equally timed race halves, is a pride point among runners, a sign that you efficiently utilized your energy in a race.) She'd go on to finish 17 marathons, with an average time of 2:33. "I ran them all with no electronics and near-even splits too," she says. "I simply ran by feel."

GO WITH THE FLOW

You may be thinking, *But my watch makes me run faster; I swear!* While it might *feel* true, most experts agree that learning to adjust your effort based on internal feedback is where the true magic happens. In a recent group of runners Jones trained for the Boston Marathon, the people who set PRs ditched their watches and ran the race by feel rather than a set pace. A study in *The Journal of Sports Medicine and Physical Fitness* might explain why. It found that endurance athletes can often leave "fuel in the tank," so to speak, when they're aware of time data.

Even high-tech trackers can't account for all variables—weather, hills, hydration, mental headspace—that impact your performance. "So you want to evolve to where you're making calculated decisions based on internal cues, like your perceived exertion, rather than a number," says Blenis. Per a study in *Medicine & Science in Sports & Exercise*, runners who adapt on the spot tend to be more efficient (running further, and faster, while burning less energy). Jones says many clients convince themselves a certain time on their wrist is "hard." That causes the pace to feel more difficult. Proof: A study in *Frontiers in Physiology* found performance fatigue is often in your mind. Get out of your head, says Larry Shapiro, Ph.D., author of *Zen and the Art of Running*, and you can disconnect from exhaustion and potentially run faster—or at least feel less pooped at your current pace. "Think about how the pace is affecting your breathing, or how your legs feel," he says. "There are so many other things to pay attention to."

FIND YOUR BALANCE

Data fanatics, no worries—you can still geek out on numbers. "GPS watch data can be helpful, especially for beginning runners trying to figure out what a certain pace feels like," says Blenis. When training for a race, Blenis also has his intermediate and advanced athletes wear GPS trackers—hidden from sight with a "no look" policy. "We view the data after the run," he says. This simple tweak allows you to get in a flow without distraction, yet optimize your training with hard metrics. Try it: Place a piece of tape over your watch face, or stash your phone in a pocket. After your run, instead of just analyzing the numbers, think bigger picture about what impacted that specific workout. Was your pace way slower or did the run feel much harder than your last few? Could be a sign you're overreaching or overtraining. Were you dehydrated, sluggish after a long work day, or annoyed by an ill-fitting sports bra? Jot those "emotional notes" down along with the technical data. The combination will help you identify patterns and pick up insights that can make you a better, happier runner. And that last bit is crucial.

THE ULTIMATE CONNECTION

Any time you run with a watch, you likely focus on the result—like finishing in a certain time—rather than the experience. "When we can 'unplug' from our devices, we can begin to cultivate a deeper sense of mindfulness toward running," says Sakyong Mipham, head of Shambhala Buddhism and author of *Running with the Mind of Meditation*. "We can tune in to our surroundings, whether that's the stillness of nature or the bustle of the city." Maybe that's why those who run free also enjoy it more: One study found that people who are mindful while exercising reported more gratification, which is associated with sticking to a fitness routine. (For a simple exercise that can boost your Zen-ness, see "The Power of Breath," top right.) Even better, it may remove the unnecessary anxiety that might come from obsessing over every step. "There are so many areas in life where we have to be concerned with success—deadlines and performance outcomes we have to hit," says Shapiro. "Why treat running like one of those activities?"

THE POWER OF BREATH

Before you crunched digits, you inhaled and exhaled. Why that simple in-and-out could still help you run free...and farther.

Proper breathing is the natural way to pace yourself on a run, says Blenis. "Most people settle on a two-two breathing rhythm regardless of speed," he says, which is two steps as you breathe in, two as you breathe out. Instead, tweak that rhythm. "For low-intensity runs, do four steps on the in breath and three steps on the out breath; then three steps on the in breath and two on the out for moderate-pace runs; and two and one for fast runs," he says. Run as fast as you can while comfortably sustaining one of those patterns. If you can't, you're going too hard or too slow. (The first few times you try this, you can wear a tracker if you want to know the pace that corresponds to each breathing pattern.) The method helps you auto-adjust your speed to the tougher uphill and easier downhill. "It also helps prevent injuries," says Blenis. When your diaphragm is filled with air, it is able to help your core absorb impact more effectively; as you exhale, your ability to handle impact is reduced. An even-odd breathing pattern helps alternate which side of the body receives the stress.

LOVE YOUR TECH?

You do you, woman! But rather than sweating over your pace, try looking at these three numbers, which can help you become a stronger runner.

► **Cadence** How frequently your feet hit the ground. Optimal cadence varies by person, but experts say to aim for 160 to 180 steps per minute as your sweet spot.

► **Vertical Oscillation** How much "bounce" is in your running motion. Typical oscillation is between 6 and 13 centimeters (elite athletes have even less bounce). You may see this number drop as your form and speed improve.

► **Ground Contact** How long your foot spends on the ground with each step. An ideal range is between 160 and 300 milliseconds. Faster times tend to be a result of a quicker cadence and improved leg power. ■