

# PHILADELPHIA MARATHON



The Complete Course Guide

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Since 1994, the **Philadelphia Marathon** has become one of the best marathons in the United States.



Philly puts on a great show with all the amenities, world-class timing and organization, and a nearly perfect marathon venue to run a fast finishing time.

And for good reason:

- The weather is mild, with an average temperature in the 40's on race morning
- The course is fast, with only two significant hills
- It's picturesque, passing by landmarks like the Philadelphia Art Museum, the Liberty Bell, and waterfronts on the Delaware and Schuylkill rivers

The Philadelphia Marathon also has a special place in *my* heart because it's where I ran my 2:39:32 personal best. In 2011, my comeback marathon was Philly after a physically and emotionally difficult debut at the 2008 New York City Marathon.

## STRENGTH RUNNING

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But the Philadelphia course allowed me to execute a near flawless race strategy, avoid many of the mistakes I made at NYC, and accomplish my goal of breaking 2:40.

Today, I want to share an unofficial Philadelphia Marathon Course Guide with you based on my experience running the race, those of my runners who have completed it, and about 10 hours of research into the course itself.

Running a new PR (and having fun while doing it) at the Philadelphia Marathon requires careful preparation. You have to know the course – even if you’ve never run it before.

A smart race strategy could be the difference between running a new personal best (and staying healthy) or a slow shuffle past the Art Museum toward the finish line.

## How to Use the Philadelphia Marathon Course Guide

Let me be blunt: I don’t have all the answers. No runner or coach does, but I can give you the necessary details that will help you run a fast race.

First, check out the basic information in the next section. This info is common knowledge and freely available on the Philadelphia Marathon website. I thought it would be helpful to put the course info in one place for you.

The following sections go over different sections of the course, outlining what you can expect and how to take advantage of specific course characteristics to maximize your performance.

Any course guide can only go so far – it has limitations. If possible, you’re encouraged to visit Philadelphia to run the final 20 miles to understand the intricacies of the course, its nuances, and what it feels like to run the streets of the city.

Nothing takes the place of learning by doing. But if that’s out of the question, this course overview will help you. First, think back to your previous marathons and ask yourself:

- Where did I have trouble? Did I start too fast, take a wrong turn, or lose motivation at a certain point?
- Am I a “crowd runner” and thrive on cheering spectators but lose momentum with empty stretches of road?
- Do I run best when I know the course or prefer to be surprised?
- Do I need support from the aid stations or will I carry all of my fuel and hydration needs?

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These questions will help guide how you tackle the Philadelphia Marathon. This guide will outline what to expect on marathon weekend from the morning of the race all the way to the finish chute.

Even if you take away just one key lesson from this guide and apply it to your race, I'll be excited that you had a better experience at Philly than you would have without it.

Finally, remember to have fun! Cherish your time on the course and remember that every marathon is a gift. Running 26.2 miles is a feat worth celebrating so enjoy yourself on the course.

## Philly Marathon: The Basics

To answer my grandmother's question, "How long is that marathon?" I'll confirm that yes, Philly is 26.2 miles. Great question, Nana.

Check out the [official course map](#) and the [certified course map](#).

The [elevation profile can be found here](#).

Here are the other important aspects of the course to remember:

**Location:** The Philadelphia Marathon starts and finishes in front of the Art Museum on the Benjamin Franklin Parkway, just Southeast of Eakins Oval.

**Date:** Philly is typically held on the Sunday before Thanksgiving every year in November.

**Elevation:** Philly is a *net zero* elevation gain course, meaning that it starts and finishes in the same spot and therefore has the same starting and finishing elevation. The highest point is 70 feet above sea level with the lowest point at 15 feet above sea level. The start and finish lines are at 33 feet.

**Hills:** With only two major hills in the 8th and 10th mile, Philadelphia is not a hilly course. However, there are some smaller rolling hills throughout the race, particularly between 18-21 miles

**Turns:** The Philadelphia Marathon has fewer sharp turns than other fast fall races, like Chicago for example. It has 20 90° turns and three 180° turns (by comparison, Chicago has 34 90° turns and two sharper turns that aren't quite 180°).

**Certification:** Like any major road race, Philadelphia is USA Track & Field certified using the SPR method (shortest possible route). This means that the course is measured along the *tangents*, so remember not to run wide when making turns!

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**Mile markers and timing:** There are markers at every mile so you'll be able to manually check your splits. There are also clocks available at the 10k, half marathon, and 30k points that provide the running time. Every runner is electronically timed

**Aid stations:** There are 17 aid stations along the course, with some providing water and sports drink and others providing race fuel (currently Clif Bar is a sponsor so Clif Shot gels are available). Aid stations are set up on the left and right sides, as well as in the center and on both sides of the road.

**Temperature:** Philadelphia in mid-late November has perfect marathon weather: an average high temperature in the mid-50's with an average low in the mid-30's.

**Wind:** The first 11 miles of the course shouldn't be windy as you're in the city, protected by buildings. But as you run along the Schuylkill for the final 15 miles, it could be potentially windy though it's not problematic for the runners I spoke to about this in 2010, 2011, or 2013.

**Field size:** There is a maximum of 30,000 runners allowed to compete in the marathon. This field usually sells out every year.

**Registration:** Open to anyone as long as you can maintain a 16-minute average mile pace. Seeded entries are available, which guarantee placement in the first corral if you meet certain performance times within the two years before the race.

**Toilets:** Finally, some important information! There are portable toilets at the start/finish area and at every water station along the course. I didn't have a problem waiting in line before the race.

Ok, now that we've talked about the logistics and details, let's dive into the course itself.

But first, a disclaimer about the elevation maps used in this guide: they make the course look a lot hillier than they really are!

When I was initially considering the Philly Marathon, I was skeptical since I wanted a fast marathon. But my uncle and friend both admitted the hills weren't challenging. A friend told me:

*"In general, the first half flies by and feels really fast because the spectators are amazing in the city and there are so many runners because the half and full run together. There are some hills, but only one significant one. What's great is that, if you haven't gone out too fast, the gradual downhill back into the city is really helpful in the last miles of the race."*

The elevation profile's scale displays 50 foot increments, which isn't a large gain, particularly when it happens over 1-2 miles.

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So don't worry if you think the race looks hilly – it's really not!

## The First 5k: Patience is a Virtue



The Philadelphia Marathon begins on the Benjamin Franklin Parkway – a straight, flat road that can entice you to start too fast. With only eight turns in the first seven miles and virtually no hills, it's critical to stick to your pacing strategy.

Many runners make the mistake of starting too fast, leading to muscle cramps and the infamous "bonk" during the final 10k. Don't let that be you!

Focus on running 10-20 seconds per mile slower than your goal pace for the first 2-3 miles. Warming up like this helps your body get used to Marathon Pace. A [dynamic warm-up](#) before the gun while waiting in the starting corral is helpful, too.

Crowd support during the first 2 miles is fantastic and fans will be on both sides of the road cheering you on. Soak in the energy, but don't let it pull you out too fast, burning unnecessary carbs (you did [carb-load](#) before the race, didn't you?) and wasting energy. Bottle it up and save it for the final 10k!

The road surface is fairly well maintained during the first 3 miles as well since you're on main roads in downtown Philadelphia.

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## Miles 4-10: University City and the Philadelphia Zoo



After the first two miles, the course begins its journey through West Philadelphia and University City. Here you'll find college students tapping kegs and thick crowds cheering from both sides of the street.

Side note: don't be surprised if you're offered beer multiple times. It's up to you whether you want to enjoy a cold one with 19 miles to go!

Some of the smaller roads on this part of the course have potholes and deep cracks, so be sure to watch your footing. Rain will make manhole covers slick so avoid stepping on them to prevent a fall.

Soon you'll experience the first major hill of the Philadelphia Marathon during the eighth mile. It's important not to expend too much energy on this hill as you're still nowhere near halfway done.

Run at marathon *effort* (not *pace*) both uphill and downhill. You'll be about 30-45 seconds slow going up and about 20 seconds fast going down. There will be opportunities to make up time later on the course, so don't worry if you have one or two slower miles.

At this stage of the race you'll be near the Philadelphia Zoo and crowd support is limited. After a few rolling hills, the last significant hill on the course presents itself in the tenth mile. Take the same approach and run marathon effort up and down the hill.

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## Miles 11-13: Let's Make Up Some Time!



For the next few miles, you'll be along Martin Luther King Jr. Drive as it winds next to the Schuylkill River. There are several overpasses where fans gather to cheer and this is a good opportunity to get a nice mental boost as you near the halfway point.

During miles 11 – 13 you can make up some time by running 5-10 seconds under goal pace. This section of the course is flat and fast; as long as your effort is about the same as marathon pace, you'll have no problems running just faster than goal pace. My fastest mile in 2011 was during the 11th mile where I ran 5:48 (too fast!).

Soon you'll cross the river and split from the half marathon runners and turn left around the Philadelphia Art Museum. It's painful to run so close to the finish line and watch others finish (while you're not even halfway there), but enjoy the crowds at this point – they're the loudest and thickest for the rest of the race. It makes running slightly under goal pace much easier.

## Miles 14-19: The Loneliness of Kelly Drive



The most difficult aspect of the Philadelphia Marathon is the second half of the course where crowd support is extremely limited. You're now running an out and back along

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Kelly Drive and there will be virtually no fans on the right (east) side of the road. Here it's critical to focus on how your body is feeling.

Is your breathing controlled? Are you running smoothly, efficiently, and relaxed? Are you in a positive state of mind?

Here it's important to concentrate on your goal pace and tick off as many consistent mile splits as possible. The course is mostly flat from miles 14-18 and you can run at goal pace or just under, making up for a few slower miles during the early hills.

An awkward part of the Philadelphia Marathon course is a short out and back during the 18<sup>th</sup> mile. After taking a sharp left onto a bridge crossing the Schuylkill River, you'll run downhill to a turnaround point, where you'll then make a 180 turn and go back up to Kelly Drive.

Make sure you don't run too fast on the downhill toward the turnaround point. At this stage of the race, you'll be experiencing the beginning of the marathon's cumulative fatigue and muscle cramps are more common. Excessive pounding on your legs while running downhill can make for a painful final few miles, so stay controlled while running downhill.

## Miles 20-25: Time to Get Tough



After you return to Kelly Drive, you'll then be running into Manayunk and the turnaround just before the 20-mile marker. Manayunk has fantastic crowd support, conveniently right when the marathon becomes extraordinarily difficult so draw from this energy.

If you're feeling good and want to take a small risk, surging to about ten seconds faster than goal pace during mile 21 or 22 can be a helpful strategy for runners who are chasing a personal best or a [Boston Qualifying time](#).

There are several small downhill segments in these miles that you can take advantage of, surging just slightly so you can bank some precious seconds.

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After the turnaround point, you'll be running back toward the Art Museum on the left side of the road. Slower runners approaching the 20-mile mark will be on the right side of the road running the opposite direction.

There's no need to run along the curb as far away from the oncoming runners, but make sure you're running the tangents as best as possible and not running too close to the double yellow line (brushing a runner with your elbow is not what you need this late into a marathon!).

While crowd support is weak during miles 22-25, use the energy from the oncoming runners to fuel the last few miles of your race. They'll be cheering for you, so don't forget a smile, which has a side benefit of putting you in a better mood for the toughest part of the marathon.

This section of Philadelphia – and arguably every marathon – is the most difficult. Trust in your preparation and fitness. It will never be easy to run strong during these miles, but it will be possible if you trained well.

Here are a few pieces of late marathon strategy:

**Focus on your running form.** It's easy to let your form deteriorate in the final miles as you become increasingly fatigued. Make sure your shoulders are relaxed, you're taking quick steps, and you're not holding any tension in your upper body.

**Repeat a mantra.** During my PR marathon at Philly, the mantra "relax" worked well, even as I was surging during the final few miles. Some runners prefer other mantras like:

- "I've done workouts harder than this!"
- "This isn't so bad, I'm having fun!"
- "Just two more miles? That's so short!"

Whatever your mantra, make sure it inspires confidence in your ability and motivates you to push toward the finish line.

**Enjoy yourself.** I often tell my coaching clients, "don't forget to have fun." This is why we run! Competing in marathons is a blast so enjoy the final miles as you experience a heightened sense of being. Just think: you don't feel tired, you feel *alive* at a whole new level.

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## Mile 25 – 26.2: Soak in that Marathon Energy

As you make your way to the Art Museum, the crowds will get thicker and you'll begin to hear the deafening cheers from fans and the announcers. Take advantage of this energy to give the last mile everything you have – there's rarely an opportunity in a runner's life when they're being cheered on like an Olympic athlete, so enjoy it!

Once you pass the Art Museum, there's less than a quarter mile left. Give it all you have and put on a show for the spectators at the finish line. Take in the crowds, the sights, the energy, and the magic of completing 26.2 miles. There's nothing like it.

While the elevation profile makes it seem like the race finishes uphill, I distinctly remember a slight downhill when I ran in 2011 and while spectating in 2010.

Once you cross the finish line, you'll get a medal and several food and hydration options. While eating or drinking might be the last thing you want, jump start the recovery process by drinking some sports drink with additional carbohydrate from a banana, bagel, or warm soup (that appealed to me in 2011).

*Additional reading:* the definitive guide to [post-marathon recovery](#).

Remember to keep walking and don't sit or lay down, which will make the rest of your day more painful. Walking for 10-20 minutes after the race is a good warm-down.

Your family and friends will be able to meet you further down the Benjamin Franklin Parkway. Unlike the [Boston Marathon](#) where there are designated family meetup areas, at Philly the road simply opens up to the general public and you can meet friends and family there.

It's time to celebrate – you just finished the Philadelphia Marathon! Congratulations, months of hard work have been realized and you're now a marathon finisher. Maybe you have a new PR, a Boston Qualifier, or simply another marathon completed.

No matter your initial goal, finishing a marathon is always worth celebrating. After a shower, enjoy a hearty meal and perhaps even a post-marathon adult beverage (I always do). I'd say you deserve it 😊

**Good luck with the Philadelphia Marathon this year.** Trust your training, execute your pacing strategy, and have fun!

If one of your bucket list goals is qualifying for Boston, download the [free BQ Blueprint](#) to learn how Matt Frazier dropped over 100 minutes from his personal best and qualified for Boston.

You'll see how he went from 4:53 to 3:09, what mistakes he made (that you can learn from), and the training he did to improve by so much.

