

**BETTER HALF**

THE RETURN OF MR AND MRS MILLARD

# The marathon

Rosie and Philip, in their biggest challenge yet, grit their teeth, tighten the laces on their trainers and get ready to raise thousands for charity

**Mrs Millard thinks****"I really don't want to do this. Well, I do, but I'm worried about failing"**

Like everyone else, I view the London Marathon, on April 13, with a mixture of regard and fear. And desire, for a fleeting moment, when I see that aerial shot of the milling thousands at Blackheath. What a great thing to do, I think. Next year I'll pluck up the courage to apply. Of course, I never have. Really, what I am thinking is that the London Marathon is a great thing to have done. Because no one actually wants to run the blessed thing — 26.2 miles. Unspeakingly ghastly. Getting the medal, what a feeling. If only there was a way around it.

I see preparing to run the marathon a bit like preparing to have a baby. Most women rather like the way it begins, and feel great when they see the end product. I was thinking about childbirth only this morning, while on an eight-mile run around one of North London's least glamorous parks. I am on a schedule that is so gruelling it looks like something produced by the Army. Which is worse; the London Marathon, or going into labour? From my current position, it's a close call (and I'm a proud mother of four). At least with childbirth, you have the option of pain relief. "Oh, you'll lose your big toenails," said a friend who did the marathon in 4 hours 30 minutes. And, from what I've read, both nipples.

Then there is The Wall, the point at which you can no longer put one foot in front of the other. I fear that I will spend so much time anticipating The Wall's dreaded arrival that it will probably turn up at around Mile 2. And so we proceed, at a grim clip, towards April 13. Above my desk, my sophisticated *New Yorker* calendar has been turned into a mileage log — I have also been clocking up the miles on my tracker chart on The Times Health Club. At this juncture, my miles (in blue) on the calendar have been clocking up rather more successfully than Mr Millard's (in red). This drives him mad. I hope it will drive him on. Because if he is driven on, then I will be.

Why am I so nervous? I've always wanted to do the London Marathon. I ran a perfectly respectable 10km the other day (49 minutes, if you really want to know). I'm doing it to raise money for an important charity, Help the Hospices, which aims to ensure the best possible care is provided to all those affected by terminal illness. I'm hoping that my efforts will raise thousands of pounds. But getting through the race? That's where mental strength comes in, and that is my Achilles heel. At which point, bring on Amanda Owens, a sports psychologist, who used to play tennis for Britain, is on the British Olympic Association advisory board, and is sports psychologist for Surrey and Essex county cricket clubs. And she has run the beast herself.

"You will have no problem running the London Marathon," are her first words when we meet. "We need to remove the mental blocks you have built up." We discuss my ideal running

conditions. My idea of a perfect run is to go out on my own without so much as a watch, let alone an i-Pod, and to let the miles clock up, unremarked. I do not wish to be among 30,000 runners, many of whom will be in comedy outfits. I don't want mile markers, buzzing helicopters, and streets lined by Paula Radcliffe fans. Yet that is the reality of the London Marathon and I fear that it will make me want to give up, simply out of disorientating panic.

Amanda outlines her coping strategies, which include running on a treadmill surrounded by video clips of the Marathon — something she can set up for me at her gym. This is so I get used to the overwhelming noise and the crowds. She talks about a different method for envisaging the monumental distance. "You have to break it down. Think about it as two half-marathons, or eight sections of three miles (plus a wee bit more). We want to create a Rosie bubble for you to run in. This will help you not think about the other people who are running alongside you."

She advises me to start a running journal, marking down each of my training runs. "How did you feel during the run? How did you get into your flow?" We talk about visualisation techniques. "I want you to work out how you are going to feel lining up before the race begins. And what you will look like. I want you to visualise yourself at mile 16. I want you to visualise yourself finishing."

Lining up? Mile 16? Finishing? No, I still can't really believe I am going to do this, but after my first session with Amanda, somehow all that money I hope to raise and that very special silver wrap which you get at the end of 26.2 miles has inched a little closer.

**HER EXPERT SAYS**

Familiarise yourself with the route and **key monuments** along the way. Don't **over-train** or get fixated with punishing set routines. Make sure you get in a long **weekly run**.

Mentally put your negative thoughts on running into a black box, and **chuck it out** of a virtual window. Remember that everyone else will be **feeling nervous**. If you get into a negative mode while running, use **positive visualisation** to get yourself out of it

Amanda Owens is a BASES-accredited sports psychologist (07736 853375), who runs the sports consultancy Believe.com

**HOW TO RAISE MONEY FOR HELP THE HOSPICES**

This charity raises funds for, and awareness of, the 240 British hospices that offer free care for all who need it. If you would like to sponsor Rosie, click on [www.justgiving.com/RosieMillard](http://www.justgiving.com/RosieMillard)

■ To track Rosie's progress in training for the marathon, and to send postings, go to <http://mrsmillard.timeshealth.co.uk>

**Mr Millard thinks****"Which nutter invented such ludicrous training schedules?"**

I'm running the London Marathon and I need help. Most of all, I need counselling for agreeing nearly a month ago to take part in the first place. I suspect the psychiatric advice will be the same as my neighbour Tim's. "Don't do it," says Tim, with an I-know-better look. "The training will kill you." He thinks Rosie is also bonkers; probably more so. She's been getting up to go running in the dark. For me, a mixture of vanity, stupidity and a misty-eyed desire to Do Something Different with my spouse is driving me recklessly on.

I've told as many people as possible that I'm running the marathon. And just in case I'm tempted to pull out, feign injury, or catch a convenient cold, *The Times* recruits an expert to help me through it. Lloyd Bradley, the author of *The Rough Guide To Running* (£9.99), cuts an unthreatening, if rather large presence. Somewhere near 6ft 4in, he confesses to being the wrong build to have lots of marathons under his belt. Nevertheless, he's full of optimism and reasonableness.

Lloyd's book has lots of sensible advice. One section is called "Should I be running?" The answer is: "Of course you should." Another section is headed: "Will I look stupid?" The answer is: "Not unless you are running a marathon dressed as a carrot." I won't be dressed as a carrot, but I will be raising money — £2,000 and hopefully more — for charity, in my case the autism education charity

TreeHouse, one I'm particularly drawn to having made TV programmes about learning disability. At this stage, I'm reasonably confident about the outcome. I have done several 10km runs and finished four half-marathons, although with different results. I will not be repeating the "I can win this race" technique, which bedevilled my first attempt. This resulted in a furiously fast two miles followed by 11 miles of misery as the field filed past me, including some very old people. The second attempt, ten years later, was far worse. I entered the Wimbledon Half-Marathon along with the new Mrs Millard, who was wearing lipstick and who started off some way behind me. After 10 miles, I collapsed to a near-walk, only to watch Rosie, make-up intact, speeding past me a few minutes later. My last half-marathon, about seven years ago, went slightly better. I've been using the same shoes ever since, sometimes for gardening. On seeing these antiques, Lloyd laughs and tells me I must immediately replace them at a proper running shop.

My next meeting with Lloyd is three weeks later on Hampstead Heath, in the rain. Lloyd runs just behind us and says: "Philip, you must be a funky little mover on the dance floor because you're shakin' as you run. There is too much lateral movement in your arms and shoulders, which saps the strength as it interferes with forward momentum and is a plain waste of energy." He says that I flick my feet up too much, which "interferes with a