

Wingfoot – July/August '11 Article Dealing with the Heat

The joys of summertime heat in Atlanta are few and generally does not include running among them. However it is a necessary evil to endure if you want to race successfully in the fall. So this months article will focus on understanding how heat actually effects your running and how best to minimize its impact.

Heat affects both your body and mind. Our bodies are mostly composed of water so when we start losing significant amounts of it, along with important associated minerals, its bound to have detrimental effects. Most important is that your body becomes less efficient at eliminating the waste products that the exercise creates thus limiting speed and/or duration of your workout. Heat also affects everyone differently, so for some this makes a big difference in sustainable pace and for others less so.

Our body's physiological reaction to heat is also often intensified by our psychological reaction to it. That first hot humid day of the summer seems so much worse then the same amount of heat and humidity in August. Some of this is attributable to our bodies physically adjusting to the heat but much of it is in our heads. This mental reaction to the heat makes sense, as it is just one of the ways our bodies protect themselves against the real dangers of overheating. However, much like a runner's intuitive sense of pace, our reaction to heat changes over time as we become better at interpreting our bodies' signals. Some recent research points towards the psychological reaction to perceived heat stress being more important to our reaction to heat then the conditions themselves.

A good plan to beat the heat is like a good training plan. It consists of both practical and adaptive components. The practical are things such as getting enough fluids and electrolytes (before, during and after the run), running either early or late after its cooled off a bit, finding shady routes to run, and modifying the workout or even stopping it if conditions get too rough. As most of us know, it's not just the heat, it's the humidity. The wet bulb, which is a combination of the two, is something to pay attention to. As it rises through the 70's to the 80's you need to be very careful. Here in Atlanta, smog also plays the part of adding insult to injury on those hazy days. Taking into account all of these elements will help you to better plan where and when to run. After the run, cooling down effectively and perhaps even taking an ice bath all help in recovery.

One way to help adapt to the heat is by moderating both time and intensity of runs early in the summer and building over time. Not being a slave to the watch but rather going on perceived effort is crucial to avoiding workouts ending up in disaster. As mentioned before, your mind also plays a part in how you react to the heat. Use visualizations such as imagining yourself running in cold conditions to help you to get through rough spots. Pay attention to what your body is saying and you will get better at finding a sensible sustainable pace.

Sometimes just surviving summer running is an admirable goal. Summer lends itself to lower intensity runs that provide you a good base for fall running. If you take some precautions and work with the conditions rather than against them, you just might find that come the first cool day of fall, you are in much better shape than you thought.