Olympic champion Joan Benoit Samuelson gives her tips for running a successful 26.2.

Whether you're lacing up your shoes for your first marathon or you've conquered 26.2 before, a marathon isn't just another race – it's a journey that demands preparation and training, and there are a lot of factors to consider as you gear up for the big day. To help you conquer this epic run, we spoke with seasoned marathoner Joan Benoit Samuelson, an Olympic gold medalist and two-time Boston Marathon champion.

Samuelson completed the Boston Marathon in April, and this fall, she'll run with Abbott in the Bank of America Chicago Marathon. After so many years, Samuelson continues to find inspiration from her fellow runners, regardless of their finish times.

"The most inspiring competitors aren't only the elite athletes at the front," Samuelson says. "The really moving stories come at the back of the pack."

As for what keeps her going? "My goal is to inspire those who inspire me."

Here are some of Samuelson's tips for running your best race.

**Do it for you**
According to Samuelson, the key to running a successful marathon is to run your own race. Don't compare yourself to other runners. Do it for yourself.

"You can't run anyone else's race but your own," Samuelson says. "It's your journey, your experience, your story. Go out and tell it."

**Stick with what you know**
Samuelson advises against any drastic changes to your diet the night before – or the morning of – the big race. What you put in your body will have a significant impact on your performance. While you’ll need some energy before the run, be careful not to stuff yourself.

Samuelson's race day diet includes dry toast or bagel and/or a banana, and a small amount of coffee.
“Don’t eat a lot of dairy the day before the race or the morning of,” she says. “Don’t try any new nutritional supplements on race day. Most importantly, stay hydrated! Even in the rain.”

**Don’t scout the route**

Running a marathon requires a lot of planning and preparation. But a look at the race route isn’t on Samuelson's pre-race agenda. “I never look at marathon courses ahead of time,” Samuelson admits with a smile. “What I don’t know won’t hurt.”

For Samuelson, it’s part of staying present and focusing on her goals.

“Don’t look for the first mile marker. Don’t even count them. You want to look up and suddenly see mile seven. Just look at the people in front of you and think about your time goal,” she says. “Just look at the people ahead of you and try to pull them in one by one. Feeling good at Mile 17 is a good sign but don't forget about the .2 at the end of 26. The marathon doesn't end until you cross the finish line.”

**Dress for the weather**

Samuelson says that her grandfather's favorite quote was, “We're going to have weather whether or not.”

Considering the weather is likely to change, Samuelson recommends toting along a few different articles of clothing to the start, so you can make a race-time decision. She advises running in a shirt with short sleeves or a singlet with arm warmers. You can double layer with a long-sleeved shirt that can be discarded along the route and picked up for local charity. Taking along a large garbage bag to cover is not a bad idea if rain is in the forecast.

The right attire can make a big difference in performance, comfort and health. “It's extremely important to maintain heat at the beginning of the run,” Samuelson says. “Make sure you bring enough clothing to keep warm. You do not want to be chilled before the gun goes off. If you’re cold before you start, you're in trouble; you're bound to get hypothermia.”

**The last half-mile**

Samuelson views this stretch as a sacred time, as it's the last opportunity to compose yourself before crossing the finish line.

“If you want to collect your thoughts, this is the time to do it,” she says. “Don’t ever lose sight of your goal, even if it's just to finish. Remember, it's easier to pass people at the end of the marathon than to be passed.”
Never give up
If you start to feel discomfort at any point during the race, listen to your body and slow
down. This allows your body to cool off and regain strength as you race to the finish.

"If your body is telling you to stop, listen and walk and take nourishment if
needed or advised. If your health is in jeopardy, Stop! There will be other marathons
to run." Samuelson advises. "Just stay strong. Believe in yourself, believe
in your training and believe in your heart. The huge crowd will carry you to the finish
line."