

TACTICS FOR 1500 METERS

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1. Introduction

In middle and long distance track events athletes make tactical decisions during the race. They need to use their energy selectively, preferably saving much of it for a final sprint. But their freedom of movement may be limited by other runners, so they try to hold a good position when the sprint begins. These two considerations often conflict, because free positions are available only on the outside where more energy must be expended. Tactical race elements are particularly prominent in the 1500 meters. The distance is long enough to require careful pacing, yet short enough to keep the field of athletes tightly packed for the entire race. 1500m races are often unpredictable in an even field of athletes. Good tacticians have a chance of beating faster runners in a slow race even if they could never do so in a rabbit-paced race.

It's easy to state the basic rule of good tactics: save as much energy as possible and make sure you're in a good position to use it when the right time comes. But putting this into practice is difficult. Most athletes participate in a fairly small number of tactical races each season, so there are not many opportunities to develop tactical skills. The opportunities you get will likely be your most important races of the season. With the help of this guide you will hopefully not have to learn every lesson the hard way.

A few general remarks are needed before we go into more detail.

Strategy is not tactics

The word tactics is sometimes used to describe a pre-race plan outlining what the athlete intends to do in the race. I prefer to call such plans *strategy*. Strategic plans can be worked out with the coach. Tactical decisions are made by the athlete alone during the race. It's important to have a good strategy going into the race, but

everything cannot be planned in advance. Nobody knows how the race will develop, so pre-race speculation has limited value. During the race athletes have to be aware of tactical elements such as pace and position, and they have to react to what happens around them.

Only the athlete can make informed tactical decisions

Coaches can give tactical hints before a race and help analyze tactical decisions afterwards, but good tactical decisions can only be made by the athlete. Only the athlete knows how the running feels when the race is under way. Athletes might prefer to run conservatively on the inside to save energy if their legs feel tired, but if everything feels great they might look for better positions on the outside. Tactics is not only about reacting to what opponents do; it's also about reacting to how your own running feels. Consequently, a coach yelling from the sidelines will not necessarily give the right advice.

Even and slow races are tactical

If the field of athletes is very uneven or if the pace is very fast, the race will not be tactical. The field will be stretched out so that everybody can move more or less freely, and superior runners will prevail regardless of tactical ability. The interesting case is when *evenly matched* runners compete in a *slow* race. These races occur mostly in championship competitions where the race is for qualifying or for medals – good placings, not good times. There certainly are some tactical elements in faster races also, but the typical tactical race is a slow one.

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Control costs energy

The basic tradeoff in every tactical decision is between position and energy. When an athlete is positioned on the outside, he or she can move more or less freely and respond quickly when something happens. Outside athletes clearly have more control over their destiny. But it's not necessarily good tactics to always maximize control. Outside athletes spend more energy because they have to run longer curves. Some athletes make a good tactical decision when they stay inside, saving their energy for the sprint while accepting the risk that they might not get out of the box easily. Tactical decisions always have to weigh risks and probabilities.

No general tactical rule is applicable to all races or all runners

When 10-15 evenly matched runners try to optimize control versus energy, the race develops unpredictably. Every race is different and there isn't one foolproof piece of advice which would apply to all races. Every runner is different and tactics which suit one athlete may not suite another.

Good tactics sometimes require good luck

Good tacticians sometimes prevail simply by taking a calculated risk and getting lucky. For example, the risk might be that they stayed in the inside lanes for as long as possible before finally being lucky enough to slip through a suitable gap in the sprint. They might take another calculated risk by following on the heels of a specific opponent whom they expect to finish strong. In either case there's no certainty that the tactic will pay off, but they may get lucky.

The four tactical elements

These are the four tactical elements that athletes can consider: (1) pace, (2) distances on the track, (3) position and (4) relative ability. I will first present each element briefly in chapter 2. Chapter 3 will then provide a more detailed analysis of alternative tactics at each stage of the race.

2. The four elements of race tactics

2.1 Pace

Since this guide is intended for men and women at various levels, I will consider pace only in relative terms. So instead of using specific numbers I will simply use terms like “slow” and “very slow”. The slow pace of an elite runner would not be slow for anyone else, but the tactical principles of a slow race are the same regardless of the level of competition. The table below lists a set of 1500m record times on the first row, from 3.30 to 4.40. The other rows show lap times. A record time corresponds to maximum pace, 100%, so the second row simply shows the lap time corresponding to the 1500m time on the first row.

	3.30	3.40	3.50	4.00	4.10	4.20	4.30	4.40	
100 %	56,0	58,7	1.01,3	1.04,0	1.06,7	1.09,3	1.12,0	1.14,7	} FAST
95 %	58,9	1.01,8	1.04,6	1.07,4	1.10,2	1.13,0	1.15,8	1.18,6	
90 %	1.02,2	1.05,2	1.08,1	1.11,1	1.14,1	1.17,0	1.20,0	1.23,0	} SLOW
85 %	1.05,9	1.09,0	1.12,2	1.15,3	1.18,4	1.21,6	1.24,7	1.27,8	
80 %	1.10,0	1.13,3	1.16,7	1.20,0	1.23,3	1.26,7	1.30,0	1.33,3	} VERY SLOW

The other rows show what the lap time would be if the pace was slower: 95% of maximum on the third row, 90% on the fourth, 85% on the fifth and 80% on the sixth and final row. For instance, for an elite athlete with a record of 3.30 minutes a lap time of 1.06 minutes corresponds approximately to 85%, which is slow. The corresponding 85% pace for an athlete with a record of 4.00 would be about 1.15 minutes per lap.

On the right side of the table I have indicated the paces I consider “slow” and “very slow”. Most 1500m championship races tend to be run at a pace which falls in the 85% – 95% range.

I present a table of lap times, but I don't think it's necessary for athletes to be aware of split times during a tactical race. Tactical decisions should be based on feeling and observation, not on calculation and timetables. Any runner with a little bit of experience will know if the pace feels slow or fast. Split times may serve other purposes (a comparison to previous heats, for example), but they are not essential to tactical decisions.

2.2 Distances on the track

Most participants in a 1500m race will run a bit longer than the actual race distance. In very slow races some athletes run close to 1550 meters by constantly staying in lanes 2 and 3. But this extra distance isn't necessarily a mark of tactical failure. In very slow races a runner can easily take on some extra distance without wasting much energy – at least until the pace increases. Added distance is more costly in faster races.

I will present a few calculations to give a rough idea of the cost of added distance. I have based them on the IAAF 400m Standard Track, but the distances would be almost the same for any 400m track.

The curve

Distance is most crucial in the curves. An athlete running through the whole curve in lane 2 will run 3.8m further than an athlete in lane 1. In lane 3 the added distance is twice as long, 7.7m through the curve. If an athlete moves out from lane 1 to lane 2 in the middle of the curve and stays there, the extra distance will obviously be 1.9m. Two athletes can easily fit side by side into lane 1, especially if one is a little ahead of

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the other. The outside runner will then run approximately 1 – 2m more through the whole curve.

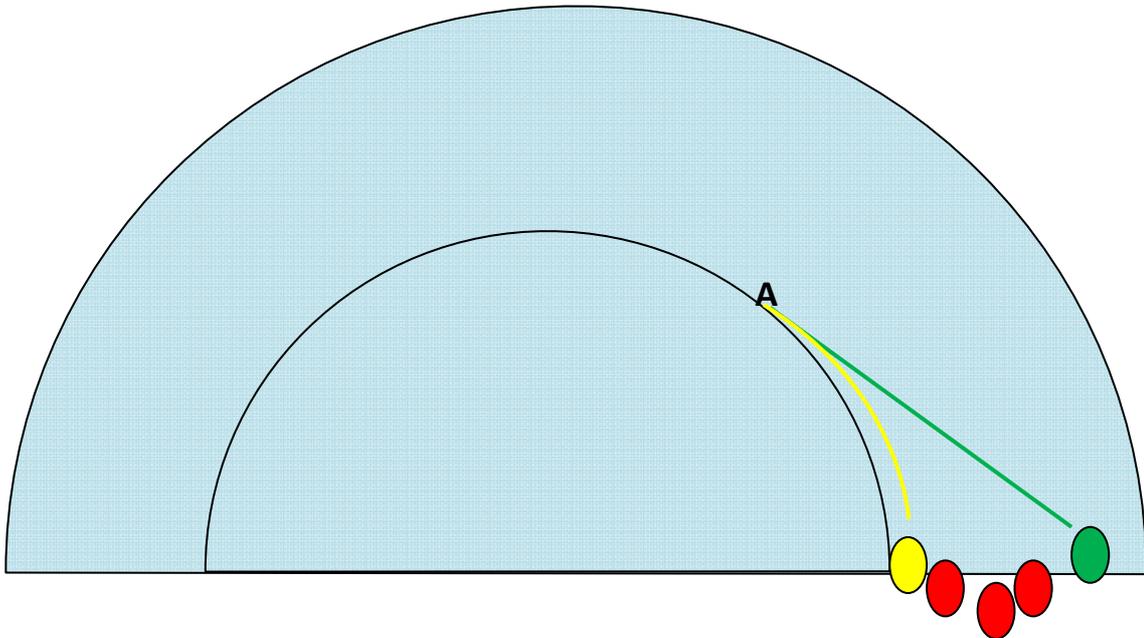
It's easy to see that speed matters a lot. If elite men are jogging along at 17.0s/100m speed in lane 1, a runner taking on 2m extra in the curve will only have to run 16.7s/100m to keep up – hardly a significant difference. Even with 4m of extra distance the required speed would only be 16.3s/100m. However, the situation is completely different in the sprint where the inside runner's pace is about 14.0s/100m. Two meters of extra distance then requires 13.7s/100m through the curve to maintain position, and four meters requires 13.5s/100m. These tenths of a second at sprint speeds obviously require much greater effort than a little increase in jog speed.

Athletes often move outward after the midpoint of the curve, preparing to accelerate onto the next straight. The ideal point to move outward would be about 10-15 meters before the curve ends. At this point an outward step adds almost no extra distance because you can run a straight line to the outside. Indeed most runners recognize this intuitively and move outward when they see the straight opening up before them. This means that the best route outward will often be blocked if many runners make the same move simultaneously.

The straight

The distances of alternative routes on the straight can be easily summarized: they're all about equally long. Even if an athlete runs all the way out to lane 5 and then returns back to lane 1, he or she will still not run more than 1m of extra distance. However, there may be more extra distance to cover as the curve begins if the athlete has failed to get back to the inside lane at the end of the straight. This is illustrated in the figure on the next page, where the yellow marker shows the inside runner in lane 1 and the green marker shows an outside runner in lane 4. The straight has ended but

the green runner has not been able to move inside past the red runners. The length of the yellow runner's route to point A is 15,8 meters. The green runner's route to the same point is 16,8 meters.



This extra meter is costly, because it often means that the green runner cannot get past the red runners as the curve begins, even though they are half a step behind as shown in the figure. To get past them the green runner will be forced to run wide in the first half of the curve, which can easily add 3 meters of extra distance in lane 3, as we saw above.

In other words, you can freely move outward on the straight as much as you need to pass by opponents, but it's important to get past them with enough time to move back into the inside lanes before the curve begins.

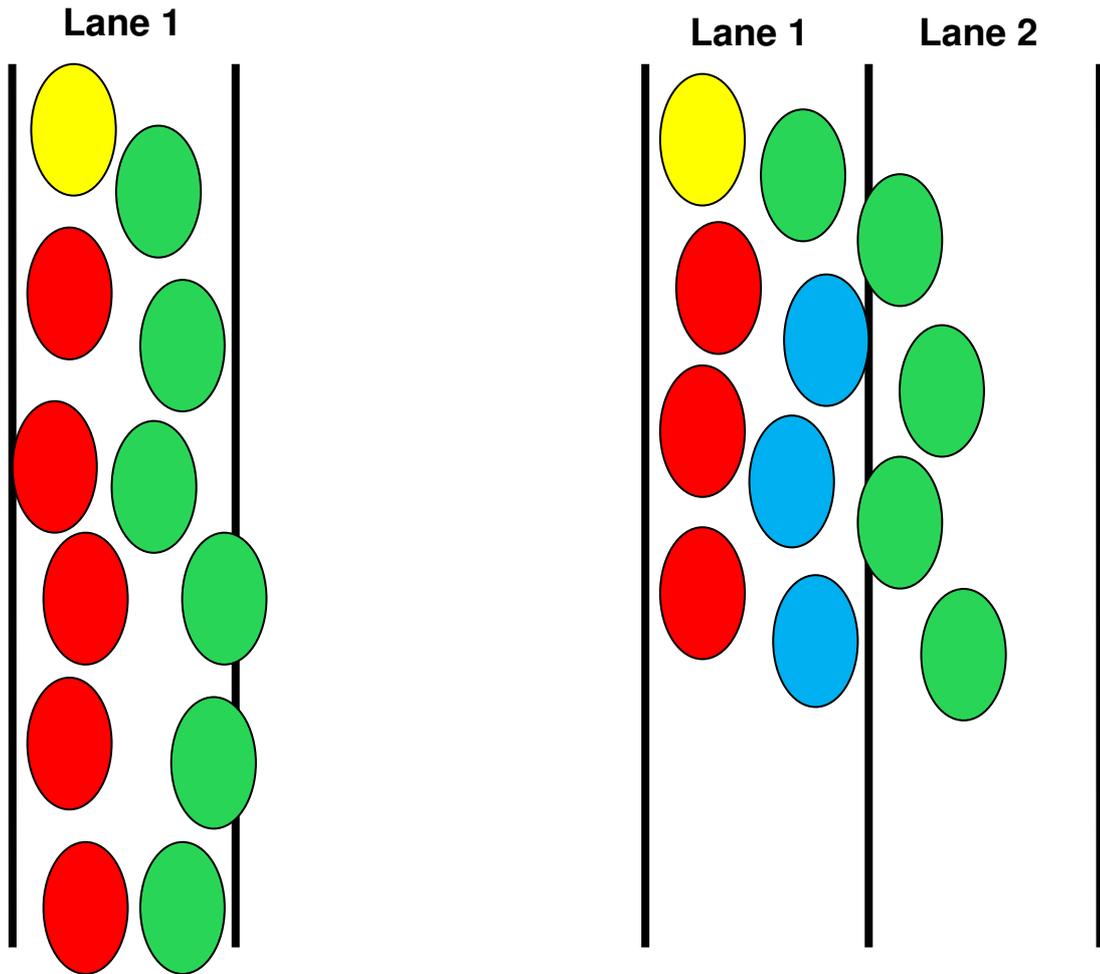
2.3 Position

Position actually has two components: specific position and relative position. A specific position means a runner's position in relation to the entire field. A relative position means a runner's position in relation to specific opponents. I will begin with specific positions and discuss relative positions in the next section together with relative ability.

In the figure on the next page I have illustrated two fields with 12 athletes. In the field on the left the athletes have lined up approximately in pairs. This is the usual formation if the pace is fast. Slow races can also sometimes take this formation, but the wider formation on the right may be more typical for them.

In both formations the yellow athlete is the lead runner and the runners in red are boxed into the inside lane. Green runners are on the outside. They can freely move outward and forward if they want to. In the formation on the right I have marked blue runners in between the red and green ones. Blue athletes are partially boxed in but will be freed from the box before red athletes can be.

Specific positions often change in a regular manner. For instance, the first green runner passes the yellow runner to take the lead. The former leader then turns into the first runner in the red queue and every other red runner falls one step back in the queue. Runners in the green or blue queues, on the other hand, can move one step forward when this happens. This is important to remember when you're running in the red queue. Lead changes often move you backward in relation to the outside positions.



The amount of sideways movement between red, blue and green positions is determined by the pace. The slower the pace, the less movement there will be.

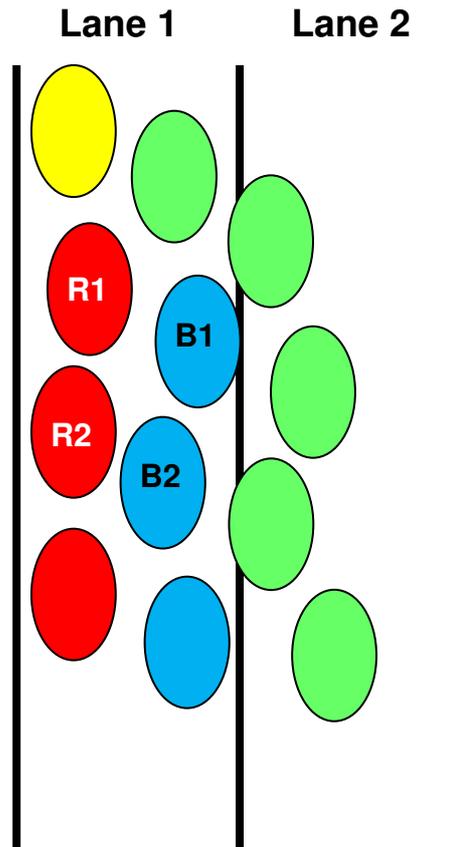
2.4 Relative ability

Some athletes are better than others, so it's important to know at least some of your opponents. Knowing an opponent means (1) being able to identify the opponent by sight during the race and (2) having some idea of how he or she is likely to run. You can then try to make tactical decisions based on your position in relation to specific opponents. Athletes can also assess if they are favorites or underdogs in the race and whether or not they expect to sprint significantly faster than the rest of the field.

Relative position

Relative position is of interest mainly with regard to athletes whom you expect to be either clearly *superior* or clearly *inferior* to the rest of the field. A simple general rule is that you should try to avoid running behind inferior runners and try to follow on the heels of superior runners. However, this is not particularly important in the early stages of the race when the field remains relatively static. The situation changes in the second half of the race. Superior athletes will eventually try to make a decisive move, while inferior athletes may already be tiring.

The figure on the next page illustrates relative positions. If blue athlete B2 expects B1 to be a superior athlete, then B2 is in a pretty good tactical position because sooner or later B1 will probably find an opening and move forward. If B2 then has enough strength to follow B1, B2 might easily get out of the box. If B2 expects B1 to be an inferior athlete this may not be a big concern, because it probably won't be too hard to move past B1 on the outside if necessary.



The choice is tougher for the red athlete R2 following superior runner R1, because R1's position is more uncertain. It might still a good bet for R2 to follow R1, but there's a risk that R1 won't be able to break free. If, on the other hand, R1 is an inferior runner, then R2 definitely needs to move outward before the sprint begins, preferably earlier.

In their pre-race strategy athletes can assess their relative ability in relation to the entire field – usually by comparing records and watching earlier races. They can classify themselves into one of the following categories.

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Favorites

Runners who perceive themselves as favorites in the race should normally try to maximize control. They can probably afford to be in outside positions for a longer time than most opponents, so their primary tactical goal is to avoid being boxed in.

Underdogs

Underdogs should try to conserve enough energy to be competitive in the sprint. In a 1500m race underdogs have a much greater chance of surprising favorites than they do in any other event on the track. But in order to be successful they have to be good sprinters and take the right risks. Having run conservatively on the inside, the underdog faces a difficult choice in deciding when to make a move outward.

Sprinters

Very good sprinting ability allows runners to take greater tactical risks. Especially in the qualifying rounds where victory isn't important, good sprinters can do well by staying inside and saving as much as possible for the sprint. As the field breaks up at the end of the race the good sprinter will usually have enough room and time to secure qualification. However, unlike overall ability which can be guessed from personal records and season bests, sprinting ability is often an uncertain factor in a field of unfamiliar opponents. Misjudging your sprint speed in relation to the rest of the field can be a crucial mistake.

3. Tactics stage by stage

3.1 Race stages

Tactical decisions are very much about *when* to make certain moves. For this reason I consider it convenient to think of a tactical 1500m race in terms of four stages. I call them the start, the jog, the surge and the sprint. I present all stages briefly here before discussing tactics stage by stage.

The start: 0m – 150m

In the start the athletes accelerate and settle into the inside lanes in the first curve. The start of a 1500m race is shorter than an 800m staggered start where athletes run 200m before entering the first curve together. That's why a 1500m start can be even faster than an 800m start. How to handle the start is mostly a question of pre-race strategy, but there are some tactical elements also. They are available primarily for the runners starting in the outside lanes.

The jog: 150m – 1000m

I call the second stage the jog because the pace is even and slow (assuming that the race is tactical). The jog ends when someone makes a decisive acceleration, which usually happens just before or after 1000m.

It's useful to think of the jog as a series of 200 meter sequences: 150m – 350m, 350m – 550m, 550m – 750m and 750m – 950m. At the beginning and end of each sequence (i.e. in the middle of the curves) the field of runners is sticky because all runners want to minimize distance. There will be very little sideways movement and nearly all runners will remain in their respective positions.

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The field becomes much more fluid on the straights where sideways movement does not cost extra distance. Many runners wanting to move up will try to make their move outward on the straight and settle into their new position at the entrance of the next curve.

Athletes looking to move up from the back of the field have to choose which 200m sequence they will use. It is easier to get past opponents in an earlier sequence, but a move to the outside may also lead to extra distance in all subsequent curves. So it may be better to run a few 200m sequences on the inside before moving out.

The surge: 1000m – 1200m

At the end of the jog stage more and more runners feel the need to improve their position. This will automatically increase the pace, starting the stage which I call the surge. The surge can sometimes begin already at 800m, but more often at 1000m.

Sometimes a new lead runner takes the initiative with a clear increase in pace, but the surge can also be a collective acceleration initiated by the outside runners. This builds up pressure which forces the lead runner to accelerate.

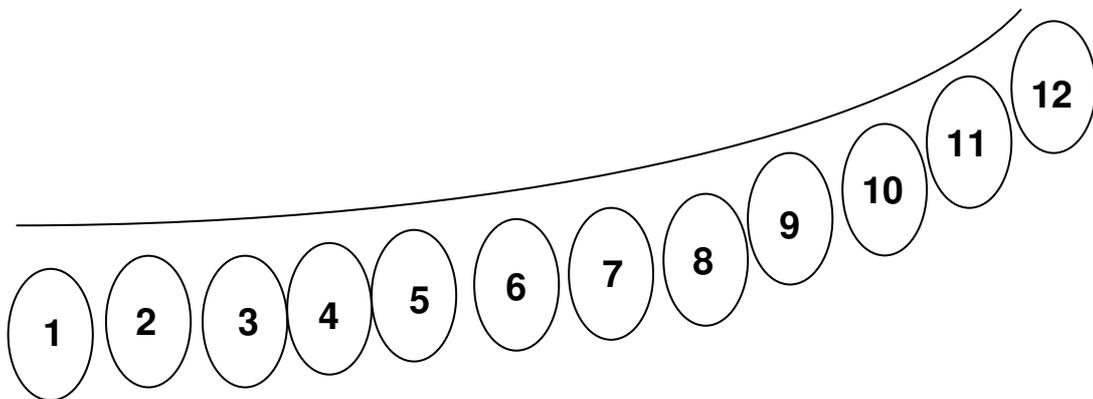
The sprint: 1200m to 1500m

In slow 1500m races the sprint has two stages: the first one from 1200m to 1300m into the final curve and the second from 1400m to the finish. In between is the curve. It is very hard to pass anyone in the curve when everyone is running at more or less full speed. The leaders might already be pulling away in the curve and the field will spread out lengthwise. Failing to be assertive in the first sprint can leave an athlete stuck behind a fading runner through the curve while the leaders escape.

The field will often spread three lanes wide on the back straight from 1200m to 1300m. Runners then move inward in the curve and spread out again as the final straight begins. This sideways movement frees up much more space in the inside lanes than has been available earlier in the race. This is the reason why being boxed into lane 1 during the surge isn't necessarily a severe mistake. A clear path forward may open up quickly when the sprint begins, especially if you can follow the right opponent.

3.2 Start tactics: 0m - 150m

As mentioned above, the start is perhaps more strategic than tactical: runners should make a decision before the race on how fast they will start. But there are some tactical aspects that runners can consider immediately after the start. I will use the following numbers to refer to runners at the starting line:

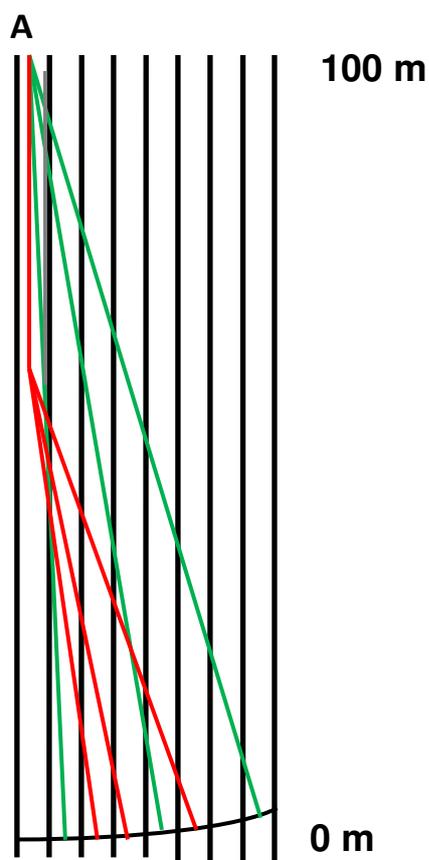


A 1500m start is not equal in tactical terms. Inside starters 1-4 have very limited tactical options. As the field settles into the first curve, these inside runners will mostly occupy red positions. They're also more likely to take the lead than either middle (5-8) or outside (9-12) starters are, because it is easier for the outside runners to move in behind an inside runner than the other way around. Most inside runners

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start fast to avoid ending up at the back of the red queue. So the fastest inside starter often becomes the leader by default.

An inside starter who prefers to be in the red queue should try to start fast enough to get close to the front, while avoiding to take the lead. An inside starter who prefers to be in the green queue has to start slowly and move up from the back. But both of these decisions are really a matter of pre-race strategy rather than in-race tactics.



Middle starters (positions 5-8) operate with a bit more freedom than runners 1-4. Much depends on whether or not somebody outside of them starts faster. In 1500m starts runners 5-8 often move inward much earlier than they need to. This limits their tactical options because it immediately squeezes them into the inside lanes. I have illustrated this in the figure on the left. The shortest route from the start line to point A is straight – shown by the green lines in the figure. Many middle starters go inside much earlier, following the red lines.

This makes the start very crowded for inside starters 1-4 and middle starters 5-8. It gives an unnecessary advantage to outside starters 9-12. Middle starters would be better off taking a green route because it preserves their freedom of movement a bit longer.

Finally, outside starters 9-12 have the greatest degree of tactical freedom at the start. This freedom is accentuated if the middle starters immediately go inside. Outside starters can then settle into suitable green positions pretty much as they prefer. Runners 9-12 don't usually take the lead in the first curve unless they specifically want to do so.

The great majority of outside starters end up in green positions after the start. An outside starter who prefers to be in the red queue would have to cut inward behind everyone else and take up a position at the very back of the field. It may be better to take a green or blue position through the first curve and try to move inside after that.

The start goes by quickly and most runners will just accept the position they find themselves in. No race is won or lost at the start, but finding a good position at this stage certainly requires less energy than finding it later in the race.

3.3 Jog tactics: 150m – 1000m

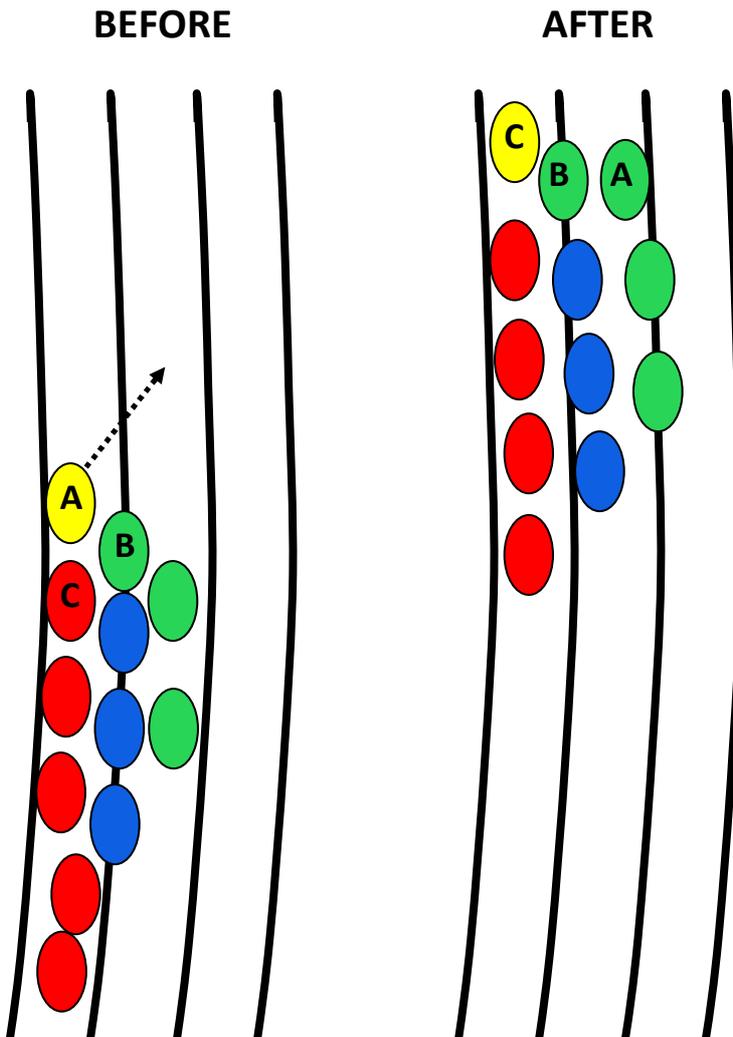
The jog stage is in some respects the most tactical stage because all runners still feel comfortable. I will discuss each position in turn.

The lead runner (yellow) in the jog

The yellow position is a bad place for most runners. It is a psychological and physical burden to lead the group, even at a slow pace. Some exceptional runners can race successfully from the front, but they are few. For most athletes the only reasonable tactic is to avoid the lead position. In international championships someone often willingly leads the field through the entire jog stage, which is strange. Predictably, these early leaders hardly ever stand a chance when the sprint begins.

It's not difficult to move out of the yellow position and force someone else to take it. One way to do this is to slow down the pace until someone else moves ahead. Sometimes this tactic works, but quite often the other runners just refuse to take the lead no matter how much the pace slows down.

A better tactic for leaving the yellow position is to deliberately move outward in a curve and then slow down. A few extra meters of curve distance work to the former lead runner's advantage in this case, because they force someone else into yellow position almost automatically. The former lead runner can then take a good green or blue position right behind the leader.



This move is illustrated on the left. Lead runner A moves out almost to lane 3 and slows down until either B or C takes the lead. Runner A now occupies a green position close to the front.

In slow races the jog stage often ends when a new runner accelerates to the lead. Sometimes the former leader is already tired and falls back rapidly as the surge begins. This is important to remember in the red queue if the same athlete has occupied the yellow position for a long time.

Green runners in the jog

The position of the first green athlete is ideal for most athletes in the jog stage. Lining up just behind yellow's shoulder, the first green athlete stays fairly close to the inside while enjoying the psychological advantage of following and the tactical advantage of complete freedom of action. Other athletes in the green queue also have some of these advantages, but they usually run further out in the curves if the blue positions are also occupied.

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Positions in the green queue change more frequently than they do in the red or blue queues, regardless of the pace. If the field spreads wide green athletes may run a lot of extra distance in the jog stage, but this won't do much harm as long as the pace is slow.

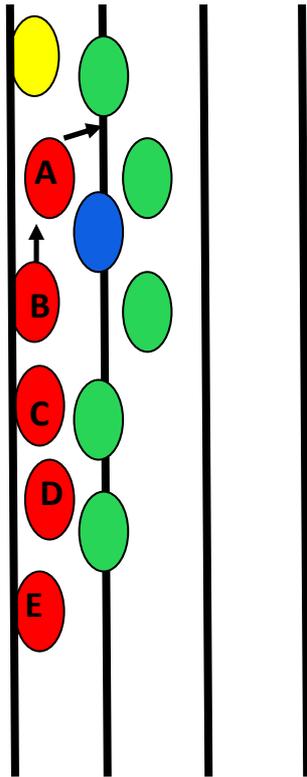
Runners at the back of the green queue may want to move forward before the surge begins. Considering that the jog stage has the four sequences mentioned above, a runner who wants to play it safe would move up from 350m – 550m or 550m – 750m. It will be more difficult to move up from 750m – 950m since the pace will already be increasing.

Blue runners in the jog

In slow races where blue positions are occupied their tactical situation is similar to that of the green runners. A blue position reasonably close to the front is a good place to be. There's usually some movement back and forth between blue and green positions in the jog stage as athletes look for optimal positions. A very slow pace limits this sideways movement. Blue runners should take special care throughout the jog to always close the gap to the runner in front of them, because they're always at risk of being forced back in the queue by red and green runners.

Red runners in the jog

The jog stage is most challenging for runners in red positions. There should be no urgency in the front of the red queue, but runners at the back will be in bad position when the surge begins.



Red runners fall one step back in the queue when a new runner takes the lead. But they can also move forward in the red queue when a runner moves from a red to a blue position, as shown in the figure on the left. B becomes the first runner in the red queue as A moves outward.

When the surge stage approaches there will be an increasing urgency to move outward and this often opens up free space in the red queue. It's very important for runner B to immediately move into the spot vacated by A. It won't remain open for long.

During the jog stage a runner in red position should have patience, wait for more space and be decisive when good gaps present themselves. Position and relative ability are the most important considerations for red runners during the jog stage. Since they are boxed in, red runners are dependent on the runner ahead of them. If one red runner fails to fill a gap the mistake is passed on directly to all followers in the queue.

If we consider specific positions in the red queue, it is evident that runners D and E at the back of the queue are at the greatest disadvantage. Even so, if they are underdogs they may want to stay there to the end of the jog stage since they probably won't find success in surging and sprinting from the outside lanes. But if D and E are favorites who can live with some extra distance, they should make a move outward early. Runners at the back of the red queue are vulnerable so they should increase their control if they can afford the cost.

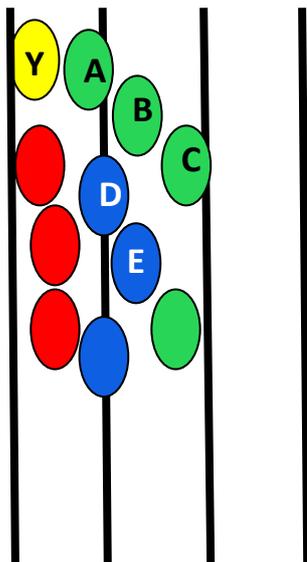
3.4 Surge tactics: 1000m – 1200m

When enough runners build up the pressure on the outside, the pace will gradually increase. The battle for good positions is much more intense in the surge.

The lead runner (yellow) in the surge

At this point of the race the yellow runner's tactical decision should be easy: stay in the lead. There's no longer any point in surrendering the lead by moving outside. The pace has increased as the surge began, so the distance benefit gained from the inside lane should not be given up.

If the yellow runner is passed by a green runner, two things can happen, as shown in the figure below. The first is that Runner A takes the lead and runs fast enough to leave the other green runners B, C still behind the former leader Y. In this case Y will not be boxed in, but instead occupy an excellent position for the sprint.



The other alternative is that after A has passed Y, B and C box in Y. D and E may also move forward from the back of the group. In this case Y will clearly be in bad position for the sprint. Much depends on how slow the jog has been. If the race has been slow it is very likely that many runners (A, B, C, D, E) will run assertively in the surge. The risk that Y will be passed and then badly boxed in is therefore bigger.

In very slow races the yellow runner consequently needs to resist overtaking as long as possible. If the pace has been faster, more opponents will already be tired and the

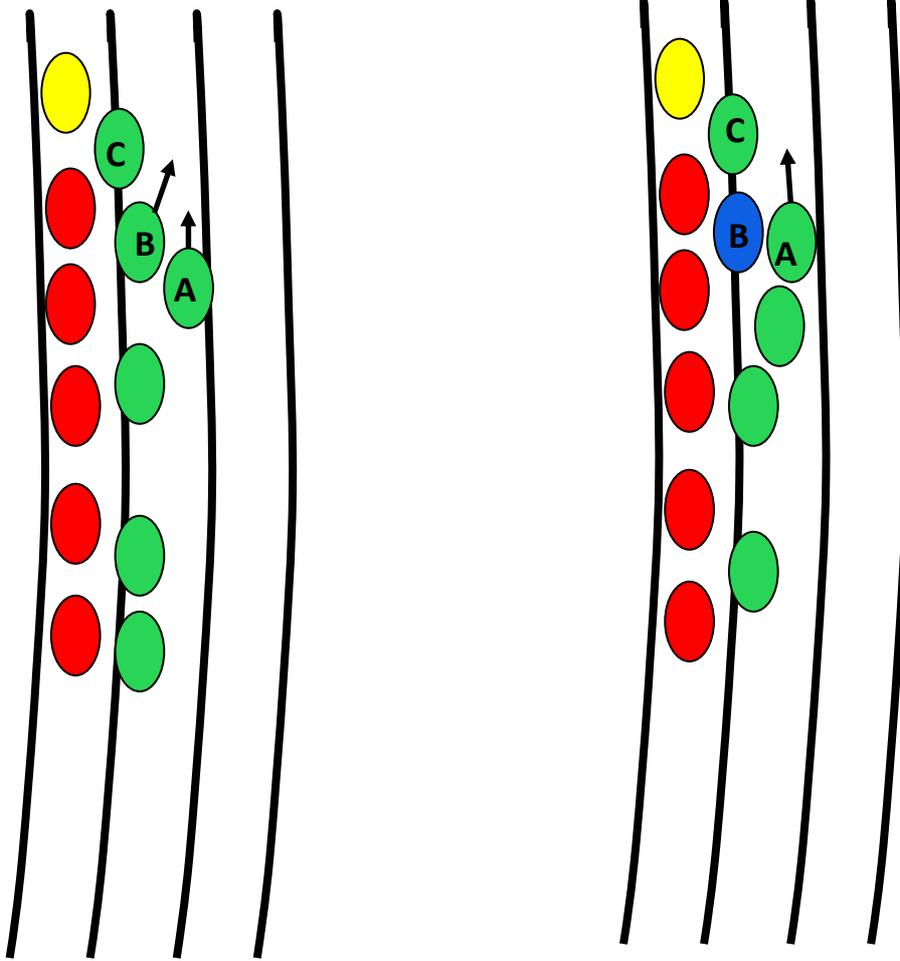
field will be strung out much further back. The risks of being severely boxed in are then smaller for Y. Y might also consider the ability of the passing runner A. If A is a race favorite Y might want to surrender the lead and focus on following A in the sprint. There's a good chance that A will stay in the lead at least to the final straight. If A is only an average contestant, Y might suspect that other runners will soon be passing A in turn. Resisting A might then be a better tactic for Y.

Green runners in the surge

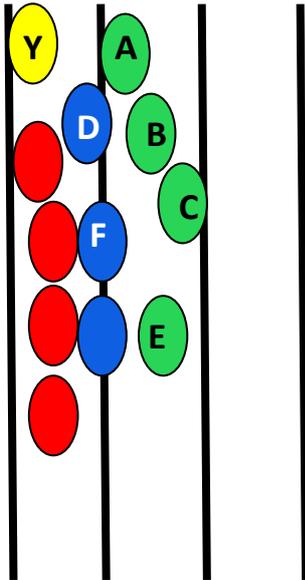
Green runners close to the front are already in good position for the sprint, so their primary concern will be when to accelerate. The slower the race has been, the larger the chance that there will be sudden movements on the outside. Someone could move up from the back of the green queue and force other green runners into blue positions just before the sprint begins. This is illustrated in the figure on the next page, where runner B is about to be passed by runner A. On the left side runner B counters this by moving onto to the shoulder of C. On the right side runner B does not counter and gets boxed into a blue position.

In the surge stage the more aggressive tactic shown on the left is in most cases preferable to the passive one shown on the right. However, runner B should also keep in mind that a move to the outside could force B to take on too much extra distance in the 1100-1200 curve just before the sprint begins. Again, B must consider how fast the pace has been in weighing these two options.

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One way for green runners to avoid being passed and boxed in is to occupy a position which is a little further to the outside than normal. This discourages opponents from moving past on the outside.



This is illustrated in the figure to the left where green runner A keeps a little extra sideways distance to the yellow leader to discourage runners B and C from passing. Blue runner D may move up between Y and A, but this won't leave A much worse off tactically. However, this kind of unconventional positioning often results in pushing, since athlete D may squeeze into the gap between Y and A even if it is a bit too narrow. So it's an uncertain tactic at best.

The green runners close to the front will consider a decisive move to take the lead during the surge. This decision is based on feeling, so no general advice can be given. A move to the front would seem justified if the athlete feels that he or she has a good chance of maintaining the lead at least up to 1300m.

Tactical considerations for runners at the back of the green queue, such as runner E in the figure above, are different. In the green queue E will have to run the last two curves wide and will have to expend a great deal of energy trying to sprint from the back of the field. E must be a good sprinter to pull it off – significantly faster than the field in the final 300m.

If E is less confident of his or her sprinting ability, it would be better to seek an inside route in the 1100-1200m curve. Such routes may become available as more optimistic blue runners move outward in preparation for the sprint.

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Blue runners in the surge

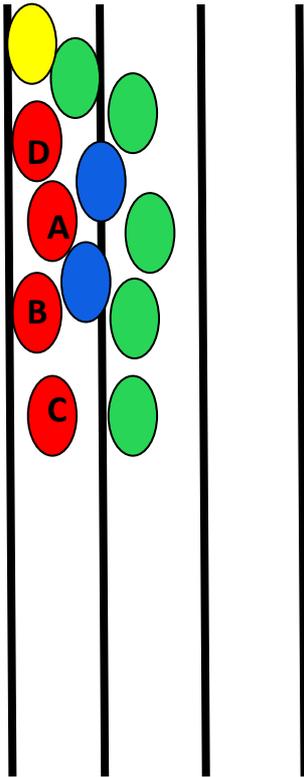
Blue positions tend to be in flux during the surge when many runners move sideways to improve their position. Blue runners choosing to move outward have essentially the same tactical options that were outlined for green runners above, so they don't have to be repeated.

Those blue runners that stay put or move inward risk being boxed in through the first phase of the sprint. The risk depends, as usual, on pace. A very slow race implies that it will take a while before gaps open up in the inside lanes in the sprint. In faster races the chance of an early escape from the inside will usually be greater.

However, in very slow races both blue and red runners can sometimes make surprising forward progress in the inside lanes during the surge. This happens when many runners move outward to prepare for the sprint, leaving the inside positions more or less unoccupied behind the leaders. Blue runners moving into these positions should observe whom they are following. It won't do them much good to settle in behind an underdog just as the underdog is about to be passed by a group of outside runners, but they might find success on the back straight (1200-1300m) if they can follow a fast sprinter who is about to take off.

Red runners in the surge

Runners in red positions have few tactical options in the surge. For the first red runner the situation is a bit similar to that of the yellow leader. If the race has been relatively fast, runner D in the figure on the next page can probably expect to sprint directly from his or her present position. But in a slow race D is more likely to get badly boxed in as the sprint begins. The relative ability of the yellow runner is of course an important consideration.



The other runners in the red queue (A, B and C) have few choices in the surge. They could try to make their way outward from the back if they have great sprinting ability, but it might be wiser to stay save energy through the surge. This decision may depend on how fast the surge is proceeding. Runner C might well move to the back of the green queue if the pace continues to be slow in the surge. In a fast surge C can just as well stay in the red queue for the duration of the surge, since he or she won't make any headway on the outside.

For most red runners the sensible tactic is to stay inside during the surge. It's important to remember that their situation is not hopeless. The field will spread out in all directions as soon as the sprint begins. There's little they can do in the surge to improve their odds of success. They just have to close any gaps they see ahead of them and wait for the sprint.

3.5 Sprint tactics: 1200m - 1500m

Successful sprinting obviously requires a lot of energy, and all runners will not have much left in the sprint. Sprint tactics really come into play only for those who still have energy to spare. Even for runners in good strength, the available tactical options available in the sprint are quite few and they are relatively simple. But they are of course all the more important at this stage of the race.

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The color scheme I used in the previous sections isn't of much use for analyzing the sprint, because positions can change so rapidly. The same tactical constraints still apply (increased control requires extra distance) but gaps can open up anywhere. Positions change unpredictably so there's no general tactical advice for each position.

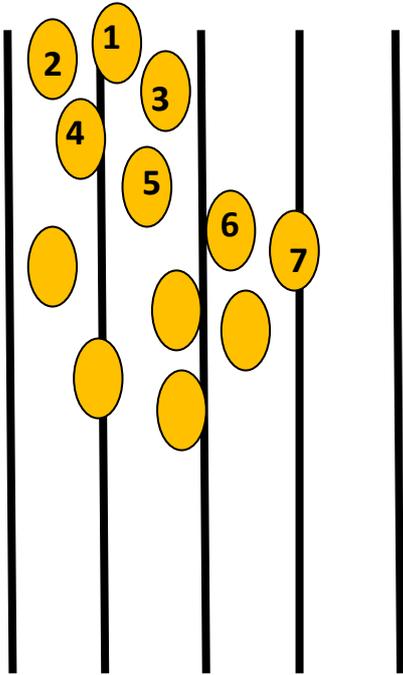
But a few new considerations now arise. One of them is the difference between a final and a heat. This difference is tactically insignificant in the earlier stages of the race, but it becomes important in the sprint. As noted before, the sprint comes in two parts. The first is the sprint into the final curve, 1200m – 1300m. The second is the sprint to the finish, 1400m – 1500m. It is difficult to get past opponents in the curve, 1300m – 1400m, unless they're fading badly.

In a heat where, say, the five best athletes qualify directly, the first sprint into the curve will not be as tightly contested as in a final. This is because most runners prefer to save their energy for the second sprint rather than risk using too much of it in the first, because the best athletes are still running relaxed and because the worst ones have already been eliminated from the lead group. In a final, on the other hand, the field will be more even and positions in the final curve can be crucial for determining who medals and who doesn't. Consequently, the first sprint will be more intense.

The second sprint also develops differently in heats and finals. The figure on the next page shows a field of runners on the final straight. If the race is a final, runners 1-3 will usually keep going at full speed until the finish line as they compete for the medals. If they fade, runners 4 and 5 may still pass them if a suitable gap opens up.

This situation can be quite different in a heat. Let's say that the first five runners qualify. Runners 1-3 may have lots of energy to spare. If they feel they're in control, they often slow down in unison 10-20m before the finish line, leaving no gaps

between them. Runners 4 and 5 may then be trapped behind their backs while runners 6 and 7 move ahead and take the two remaining qualifying spots. This happens often in tightly contested sprints.



It is of course impossible to predict whether or not the leading runners will slow down at the end and it may well be a good idea for runners 4 and 5 to take their chances behind them. But they should keep in mind that the final meters are usually more unpredictable in a heat than in a final because many runners may slow down simultaneously.

Another tactical element in the sprint is that there can be very large variations in speed. A fast sprinter can run the final straight 2 seconds faster than a fading runner. Athletes who look to be completely out of the race in the final curve can sometimes make big gains in the final 40-50 meters. This is important to remember especially for athletes who remain boxed in through the first half of the sprint until the final straight. If they still have much energy to use, running hard to the end can pay surprising dividends.

Many lead runners seem to instinctively take a step outward in the final sprint. This accomplishes nothing for them when they're in the lead, but it often leaves passable gaps on their inside. Leaders possessing full freedom of movement in the final sprint should remember to keep their lateral gaps as narrow as possible to avoid surprises from the back. It's easy to underestimate how fast a good sprinter can run the final straight if given enough room.

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Sprint tactics are mostly concerned with avoiding mistakes: not to get stuck behind a weak runner in the curve, or behind a secure qualifier who slows down before the finish, not to overdo the first sprint, not to leave lateral gaps for fast finishers. But there are some positive goals also: stay on the heels of the right opponent, move at the right time and look for the right gap. The outcome is determined by the legs, but if they succeed they usually have the head to thank for it.