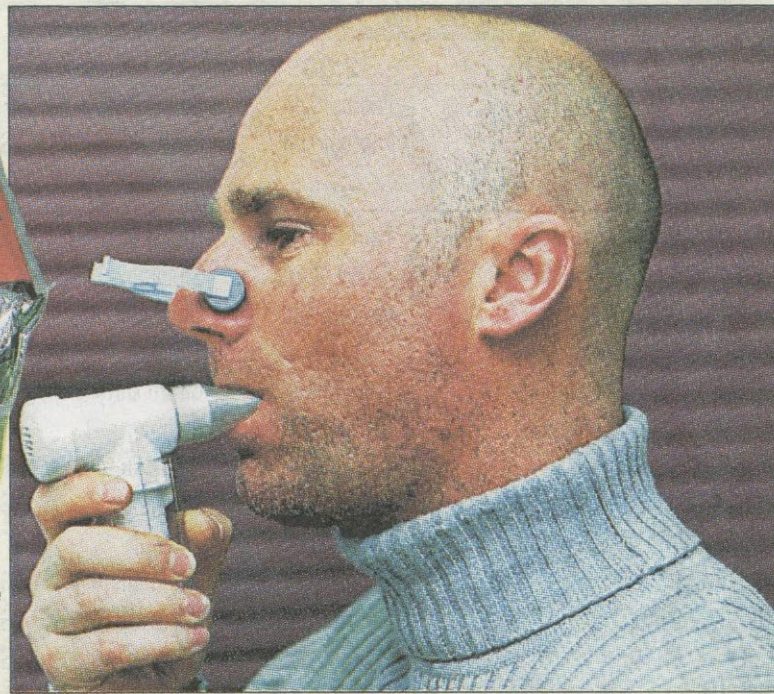




Keep on running . . . Mark Thomas, complete with string vest, is wired up by the medics for his ECG (left); the food and drink which can help training (above) and using the Powerbreathe Muscle Trainer (right)



Helping hand through the pain barrier

IT is a safe bet that anyone who completes Sunday's Flora London Marathon in under four hours will have put in hundreds of hours' training.

Nothing prepares a runner better than months of pounding the streets

SAM MURPHY

runs her sixth Flora London Marathon on Sunday and this year she bullied a friend to have all the right medical

but, as first-timer Mark Thomas discovered, medical checks and an array of technical assistance can smooth the way through the pain barrier.

Thomas, a 34-year-old socialite and social worker, was coaxed out of his Blackheath home on New Year's Day for his first training session with the aim of completing the marathon in a respectable time. He hadn't had a medical for more than five years, so our first stop was the adidas Wellness Centre, a state-of-the-art health and fitness facility in Stockport.

Thomas underwent everything from nutrition and lifestyle assessment to cholesterol measurement, an ECG and body composition analysis.

The medics were unconvinced by his claims of a daily 1140 calorie intake (a man's recommended daily intake is 2500) and he was, instead, advised to cut down on alcohol and chocolate.

After the ECG — his chest was shaved in six places and electrodes attached to his skin — the docs pronounced his cardiovascular fitness 'excellent'. And they reckoned that the hoped-for sub-four-hour marathon was well within Thomas's grasp.

"Physiologically, he could run sub-3.30, but given the time you've allowed for training, I think a sub four hour is right on target," said the expert.

Now 8lbs lighter, full of energy and glowing with health, Thomas recently completed a three-hour training run without flinching. He's had the help of a number of gadgets, gizmos and training aids — all in the name of research.

POLAR M51 HEART RATE MONITOR £114.99 (STOCKISTS, 01926 816177)

One of the most sophisticated on the market. A chest strap picks up the heartbeat and transmits information to a wristwatch display. You can keep tabs on your heart, see how many calories you burn and set the watch to beep when you work too hard or start slacking off. "It was simple but laborious to set up, but I wouldn't be without it now," said Thomas.

Verdict A winner, although pricey.
CLEAR SPORT NASAL STRIPS, £1.99
Many sportsmen and women already

checks before joining her and 42,000 other runners on the gruelling journey

use these strange nose plasters, which purport to increase the flow of air through the nasal passages and aid breathing efficiency.

"I thought these were really good, although the first time I wore one, it came unstuck," reports Thomas. "Running felt easier while wearing it — and it also does a great job of removing your blackheads!"

Verdict Worth a try.
HIGH FIVE ENERGY DRINKS, from 99p

During any form of moderate to intense exercise the main energy source used is carbohydrate, which is why many experts believe that water just isn't good enough to refuel.

"I experimented with a variety of energy drinks, including High 5 Energy Source, to give me a boost during long runs, and High 5 Isotonic afterwards, as fluid replacement," said Thomas. "I definitely felt less dehydrated when I used the isotonic drink, and didn't feel so shattered."

Verdict Essential — but stick to the powders if you're concerned about taste.

POWERBREATHE INSPIRATORY MUSCLETRAINER £49.95

The theory is that by improving the strength and endurance of the respiratory muscles, breathing will become more efficient, so less energy will be expended and exercise will feel easier.

"It's easy to use and hassle free," said Thomas. "While I'm undoubtedly getting fitter and stronger, I'm not sure if it's down to the Powerbreathe or not."

Verdict Jury's still out.
RUN AID BOTTLES, £1.99-£2.99

This lightweight, plastic oval-shaped water bottle slips over your wrist, making it simple and unobtrusive to carry — and refillable.

"This is an ingenious idea," says Thomas.

Verdict Every runner should have one.