

STRENGTH TRAINING AND CONDITIONING FOR TRAIL RUNNING



PHOTOS: INCK / ALBIK

TRAIL RUNNING DIFFERS TO ROAD RUNNING IN THAT YOU SPEND A LOT MORE TIME RUNNING UP AND DOWN VERY STEEP HILLS ALSO KNOWN AS MOUNTAINS

In Europe a form of trail running, known as mountain running, is very popular. These races start at the base of a mountain, finishing at the top of the mountain.... Yes, there is no downhill in the race! A typical race is 10-15km long, with about 2000 meters of elevation gain, and it is common for competitors to get to the top and throw up their breakfast. I think I will stick to running in hot deserts and snake infested jungles thank you!

So in order to be a good trail runner you need to have good leg strength to power up the hills, but then also enough strength to support your body down the hills so that you can run the flats fast without your legs feeling like "jelly". Trail running is a lot more "stop - start" compared to road running, and because of the unpredictable trail surfaces it is often very difficult to get into a rhythm. A typical trail run will involve jumping on and off large boulders, jumping over fallen trees, running on loose shale / rocks down steep hills, running in long grass where you can not see your footing etc. This requires a strong core, good stability / balance on your feet and explosive leg power.

The best way to improve your leg strength

and become a stronger trail runner is to run lots of hills. Unfortunately there is no quick fix or magic pill you can swallow – it takes a lot of sweat and burning quads from the build up of lactic acid, but the rewards in the long run are worth it. So my advice is get out there and conquer those hills and mountains, as they are not going to get any flatter. When I am half way up a steep climb, lungs burning, quads aching and my body is shouting to stop I take my mind off the pain and focus on the surroundings and awesome scenery – smile the pain and suffering is temporary!

Also get used to running the downhills hard, as this conditions your leg muscles not to fatigue and feel like "jelly" at the bottom of the hill when you run the flat sections.

I would suggest finding a hilly trail or preferably an up and down mountain route, and once every two weeks or month run a time trial up and down it to see if you are improving and by how much. This is a great motivator to see that your hard work is paying off and it gives you an indication of what training methods work best for you.

Training runs should include a few hill sprint sessions such as starting at the bottom of a big hill - running up one minute hard followed by one minute of recovery, repeated ten to fifteen times depending on your fitness levels. Other hill training sessions include 200-meter to 1 kilometre hill repeats followed by a recovery run down. This repeated five to ten times is a great workout. Longer slower training runs should

include a hilly route or mountain section where you work on getting time on the legs and moving at a constant pace to get your legs conditioned to being out on the mountains for a few hours. I work on time and not distance for my longer trail runs as the fitter and stronger you get the further you will run in the same time.

A number of trail runs and races have massive rocky steps that runners have to run / power walk up. On a short training run it can be easy to run up these steps. However this is not the case 70km into an 80km trail race, so I would suggest getting used to power walking some very steep hills. Power walking gives your legs a chance to recover so that you are able to run the flatter (

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sections at speed. Power walking is the same as running in that you need to practice it to get strong at it!

Training lots of hills is a great way to make you a stronger runner, but one of the disadvantages is that it will decrease your speed. So keep up the flatter and faster training sessions on the road to maintain your speed.

A strong core and good balance / proprioception is also vital to being a strong trail runner. A strong core provides your legs with a solid platform and stability to carry your upper body and will reduce your risk of

injury. A strong core decreases the stress loading placed on your legs while running and therefore the stronger your core the longer and faster you will be able to run for without your legs fatiguing. Good balance / proprioception helps you to run faster on technical terrain as you will be more stable on your feet. Therefore I suggest getting into the gym to work on your core strength and balance.

Running lots of hills can create imbalances in your leg muscles and you could end up with over developed quads compared to your hamstrings. These

imbalances will eventually lead to injury and I suggest getting into the gym and doing some strength work on the weaker leg muscle groups such as the hamstrings. Runners often neglect gym work as it does not make you any fitter or have immediate benefits to your running. However in the long run it will prevent injuries, and your training will be more consistent, making you a stronger runner.

See below ten exercises supplied by Chris Allan (my physiotherapist) to help strengthen your core, improve your proprioception and prevent leg muscle imbalances.

