

Trail running – insights into the running boom requiring a shift from efficient to adaptive!



Simple right, same as normal running but just on a few dirt roads and tracks. Wrong! There are many differences between Trail and Road running and we wanted to give you an expert insight into not only how it is so different but also how you can be better prepared to take on the trails.

Trail running is relatively new to the running population in general. In recent years the hard-core Trail runners have had to accept that their niche community would no longer remain known to only a handful of runners. Whilst this has caused some tension, there is a gradual acceptance amongst runners now that there is room for both types of runners and even more even if you add the Adventure/obstacle events into the fray.

However even the Trailrunners at the top end of the field don't always agree on what it the best was to tackle a hill or set of stairs of fly down that rocky bit of terrain. Whilst there are some conflicting views on how its best to cover certain sections of trail, there are some very unique differences between Road and Trail running and being aware of them is only going to get you better prepared.

Lets take one step back first. Trail running has exploded in recent years. Not only in the number and type of off road running events that you can now participate in but the number of people actually taking on the challenge. Take a look at the Ultra Trail Australia (formally North Face 100) event held annually in the Blue Mountains. As one example. It used to be a race only for the hard-core and Elite runners.

It still maintains that edge, but 4 years ago a 50 km race was added to the existing 100km event and last year a 22km race was added. Both those shorter distances sold out within a week this year. So caught off guard were the organisers in the first 50km running in 2013 that Vlad clearly remembers running the event and finishing before the finish was even set up! Times have changed. So lets look at some of the main differences between Road and Trail running.



Increased muscle engagement

Trail running engages more of your body's muscles than Road running. Road runners don't need as much upper body strength! But a trail runner will almost certainly fall over, need to brace him or herself, pull themselves up hills and steep stair sections and carry their gear and nutrition around an event.

The Fix: Get Runstrong! Hit the gym at least weekly incorporating Functional strength work for runners. I lead a Weekly Runstrong class says Vlad "and the moves are run specific and incorporate moves to switch on and strengthen the legs, core and importantly the upper body, you would be amazed at how little work runners pay to this type of exercise". Whilst this type of training is extremely beneficial for all runners, for those tackling the Trails its almost as important as run training itself.

Isolation

Alone for periods of time whilst refreshing and exhilarating can also be difficult and lonely – then add to that the possibility of having to run in the dark. Vlad says "Although it was only for an hour or so I vividly remember running for extended periods without seeing another person in my first long distance Trail run and the slightly unnerving feeling of wondering if you may have missed a turn or the noise of an animal scurrying through the bush somewhere close by, but then the instant relief on the next human contact"

The Fix: Mental toughness is very important. You need to push boundaries in training so come event day you don't fall apart if something isn't going to plan. Having a thorough knowledge of the course will set your mind at ease.

Time

Even shorter distance races when in comparison to Road running events, may take two to three times longer to complete simply due to the terrain. On average Trail running events are longer 20 plus kilometres with many at the 50km and even more. That's part of the drawcard really; it's an adventure and not just another run. Serious planning and training goes into preparing for many of these runs and the sense of achievement at completing such a challenge will keep you coming back and looking for the next challenge, but to finish will require your utmost dedication. The Fix: Building in a key training weekend where you run more than you would normally is a key part of running preparation. Running camps also help prepare runners for these longer events, but be prepared to put in some longer training runs in comparison to road races and this will require some forward planning for time, the route and the nutrition requirements.

Equipment requirements

Almost any event longer than a few kilometres will have certain rules and restrictions when compared to the road. Likely the first being directions. Trail runs are usually marked with directional arrows and ribbon and these can be hard to spot too. That's just the start though, you will likely be made to carry hydration and nutrition and depending on the event the list can be quite long and specific and possibly bulky and heavy, so you need to know what you need and how to take it!

The Fix: The first place will be checking the events mandatory and recommended equipment list, then get it and practice running in it well before the event.

Terrain

Stating the obvious, but the terrain whilst not only different to road running can be across multiple surface types not limited to grass, creeks, gravel, sand, snow and then add flat steep uphill, downhill narrow, and the list goes on.

The Fix: Get a good understanding of the particular event you are going to be taking on and practice. If your event will have lots of steep hills for example practice running and walking hill repeats in training. Even the best runners will walk sections of a course so you need to know how best to do this prior to race day.

In summary, the best runners on road are the most efficient runners, whereas on the Trail you will have to become more adaptive to best take on the challenge. This requires a different training approach.

So how do you best prepare?

Over coming episodes Vlad Shatrov will share with you the specific techniques, which can be incorporated into your run training to make you your ultimate Trail runner.

Vlad Shatrov of Runlab has developed a specific interval based trail running offering "mytrailgroup". In its first ever offering in October 2016 runners have been exposed to challenging sessions in beautiful terrain able to learn the techniques that will help them come race day. "Whilst I've had the desire to offer this for quite a while – there was nothing like it out there and I've had to go away research, practice and design along with Adam Clarke of UpnAdam performance coaching, the best techniques to teach this to those runners looking to add this particular set of skills to their repertoire"