

RUN ON THE WILD SIDE

by John Harding

The common factors in developing good mountain runners appear to be training regimes that include long runs in mountainous terrain and/or long bike rides.

If you enjoy trail running, and the satisfaction of reaching a summit and soaking in the scenery, then mountain running could be just the thing for you!

MOUNTAIN runs can be mostly uphill, therefore finishing on the summit, or uphill to a summit and back again. The World and National Championships alternate between the two event types. Mountain running events can be run over a variety of distances but are divided into four categories: short, classic, long and ultra.

Distance categories

Short events are 1km to 6km long, such as the monthly 2km Mt Ainslie and Black Mountain runs in Canberra, whereas classic distance races, like the Australian and World Championships, are approximately 8km for women and 12km for men. Popular runs in the 8km to 25km range include each of the peaks in the Bright Alpine Four Peaks race in Victoria, the Healesville to Mt St Leonard 13kms, Canberra's 19km Tour de Mountain and 26km Two Peaks, Hobart's 21km Point to Pinnacle, and Queensland's Mt Pomona and Pyramid races.

The most popular mountain run in Australia is the Six Foot Track 45km run from Katoomba to the Jenolan Caves, with more than 700 participants annually. This is classified as a long event. Other popular long runs are the 32km Shoalhaven King of the Mountain and the 35km Mt Wilson to Bilpin. There is a world long distance mountain running championship event held each

year, with a minimum of 1600m of the 45km track being a steep ascent.

Ultra running enthusiasts argue that the ultimate running experiences are found in events like the Bogong to Hotham 60km, Tasmania's Cradle Mountain 82km, Queensland's Tamborine Trek 62km, The Glasshouse Mountain 80km, 100km and 100 miles, and Canberra's Brindabella 54km Classic.

Who make good mountain runners?

During the last 20 years, competitors from a wide variety of endurance disciplines have excelled at the Australian Championships. These athletes include orienteering and rogaining competitors, triathletes, cyclists, cross country skiers and runners (especially steeplechasers, cross country runners and marathoners). The common factors in developing good mountain runners appear to be training regimes that include long runs in mountainous terrain and/or long bike rides.

Our best mountain runners

At the classic distance, Australia's best male mountain runners in recent years have been Paul Crake, Ben Dubois and David Osmond, each with a strong cycling and running background, and new to the scene is Scott McTaggart, a steeplechaser. Cross country runners Daniel Green and Stephen Brown have also made their mark.

The best female mountain runners are Vivian Pott, Jackie Fairweather, Emma Murray, Marnie Ponton and Kirra Rankin.

continues next page ...



Emma Murray on the Overland Track

Pott, 11th in the 2005 World Championships, was a former national junior track, cross country and triathlon champion, and Fairweather, 12th at the same meet, is a former world triathlon and duathlon champion, as well as the current National Marathon Champion. Murray, the world long distance mountain running champion, comes from an orienteering and rogaining background. Ponton has excelled as a steeplechase athlete and Rankin is a triathlon specialist.

The current World Mountain Champions are both New Zealanders; each had commanding two minute wins in the 2005 championship. Jonathon Wyatt can run 10,000m on track in 28 minutes and finished 21st in the 2004 Olympic marathon. Kate McIlroy excels at cross country, steeplechase, 5,000m and 10,000m.

Getting started

Low key shorter races are the best introduction to mountain running. However, if these are not an option, most participants in the longer races walk the longer uphills and run the flat and downhill sections.

The right footwear is essential for mountain running. The sole of the shoe must have good grip for off-road terrain, and for short uphill events, lightweight racers will do the job. For

up/down and long distance runs, trail running shoes with adequate cushioning are highly recommended.

Because of the foot moving forward within the shoe on the downhills, in long distance and ultra mountain runs, blisters and toenail damage can be a significant problem. So to minimise the risk of blisters long training runs should be used to experiment with socks, tape and Vaseline.

Other precautions are needed for long training runs in the mountains. The weather at altitude and in remote areas can change very quickly, while the danger of getting lost is also present. Hence a Camelbak with windcheater, nibbles and a map are advisable, while some runners carry an EPIRB as an additional safety precaution.

Technique

Uphill and downhill running on moderate to steep slopes requires different techniques to running long distances on the flat.

Uphill running really works the hip flexors, thighs and ankles, while fully extending the calf muscles. To keep the intensity going the runner has to consciously work their arms. At the same time the heart rate is being pushed above the aerobic threshold, so pace judgement and

a strong focus on good technique are crucial to conserving energy and reducing the feeling of exhaustion by the top of the first hill. Leaning gradually forward, taking small steps and using the ankles and arms in tandem helps reduce the strain on the quads and hips.

Downhill running involves one simple principle: the closer to perpendicular the runner is to the slope the lesser the shock on the legs and lower back. So consciously leaning forward on a downhill slope maximises efficiency. Studded shoes or other soles with good grip help greatly with downhill running confidence.

Practising good uphill and downhill technique in training pays dividends in races.

Training

There is a high crossover to mountain running ability from endurance training in sports involving distance running and cycling. So if you want to do one or two mountain running events a year for fun, then your base training will carry you through, with one proviso. Unless you have done some downhill training, if the mountain runs you intend to do contain a fair amount of downhill, then you will probably end up quite sore post event.

Ideally your preparation should involve a couple of downhill training sessions a week for a month before the race. These can be integrated into uphill training workouts or tacked on to the end of a fartlek or interval workout. What is recommended is to stride out several times (not sprint) for 100m to 200m on a moderate slope on grass or a soft dirt trail, focusing on good downhill technique. A plus from this workout is that it increases running speed. On long runs

toes and flexing the ankles, pumping the arms like a sprinter. It is done slowly. A circuit can involve bouncing up the moderate side, jogging down the steep side and bouncing back up. Then do a downhill stride out back to the start. Four to six repetitions of this circuit is a good workout.

Hill training sessions are tough and maximum benefit is gained by not racing seriously during a month long period of these workouts. A typical week includes two long runs, two hill training sessions, a session of repetitions on the flat - such as 6 x 1000m - and a couple of easy days.

The benefit of increasing hill running will be retained for several weeks if bi-weekly long runs include plenty of steep climbs. During this period an elite runner can switch to interval training to increase both leg speed and anaerobic fitness to peak for a championship. One of these interval training sessions each week should be mountain running specific, for example one minute surges up a mountain.



Julie Quinn, Crackenback Challenge, 2006

Photo: John Harding



David Osmond, Overland Track



Adrian Sheppard, Australian Mountain Running Championships, 2004

Photo: John Winsbury

David Osmond, Australian Mountain Running Championships, 2004

Photo: John Winsbury



try to include some longer and steeper downhills and consciously practise leaning forward on the downhills.

The classic uphill training workout comes from legendary New Zealand coach Arthur Lydiard. The goal is to strengthen the ankles, quads and hip flexors, while increasing their flexibility, at the same time as working the arms and lifting the heart rate to near maximum at the top of the hill. It can be difficult to find the 'right' hill. A good option has a 200m moderate slope on one side and a steeper 100m slope on the other. The runner 'bounces' up the hill. This looks like a sprinting action in slow motion. The runner lifts the knees higher than normal, running up on the

Cross training

Australia's best male mountain runners have tended to do the bulk of their training on a bike, riding 200 to 300km a week and running 70 to 80km. They arrived at this balance largely due to the injuries they endured from running more than 80kms a week. Cycling provides a tremendous workout for the quads and therefore greatly improves power for uphill running, while also significantly increasing VO2max.

Runners living in cities can have problems finding hills. Former Australian Champion Belinda Soszyn ran up stairs in a tall building once or twice a week, worked out on a stationary bike in the evening and regularly did a 4 to 5

hour bike ride on the weekend. Belinda won the Empire State Building Run Up three times and held the race record.

Current Australian Champion Vivian Pott includes treadmill runs, Pilates and other gym training in her weekly workouts. This gives her excellent core and upper body strength for uphill, plus additional aerobic fitness.

Further information

- Australian Mountain Running Association www.mountainrunning.coolrunning.com.au
- Australian Ultra Running Association www.coolrunning.com.au/ultra **RAYL**