THE BEAUTY OF CROSS COUNTRY

is that it’s against not only the competition and yourself, but also Mother Nature. Over a variety of surfaces — from dirt and grass to mud and asphalt to gravel and everything in between — you’ll find sharp turns, short steep hills, long cantered sections, logs to jump, creeks to cross, bridges to negotiate, all combining to constantly disrupt your rhythm much more so than a race run on an even, flat surface.

Whereas, for most runners, track and road races are largely dictated by pace, cross country racing is largely dictated by effort. Even on the rare occasions that they’re available, mile splits are mostly meaningless in cross country. Trying to maintain pace through constant changes of footing, elevation, and direction can cause a mid-race tie-up that’s painful to experience and can result in a placing far lower than your fitness merits.

Instead, the goal is to learn to employ a steady effort rather than set an even pace. Pete Magill, four-time masters national cross country champion, says, “A well-planned cross country course will do everything possible to disrupt your stride, your pace, and your focus. So the trick is to stop worrying about stride or pace. Find an effort level that you’re confident you can maintain, then make that your guide.”

You can learn what that effort should be, and teach your body to maintain it, with training tailored to the demands of cross country racing.

Horses for Courses

Successfully training for cross country follows the same basic training guidelines used when preparing for road races or long track events. Long runs, tempo work, long and short intervals interspersed with maintenance and recovery runs are the basic building blocks of training.

For cross country, however, you’ll need to incorporate terrain, elevation and course changes that mimic what you’ll encounter on race day. By regularly tackling the sorts of rhythm breakers cross country throws at you, you’ll adapt and learn how to dole out the appropriate effort over 20, 40 or however many minutes of racing you’re doing.

The more course-specific your preparation, the better. Armando Siqueiros, who coached Jordan Hasay to a Foot Locker national title at Mission Prep High School in San Luis Obispo, Calif., says, “The thing I’ll do is scope out the course we want to run our best on and try to mimic that course with some of our workouts. We’ll run our fartlek or repeats over different ‘parts’ of the course. The kids can then imagine themselves running over the terrain they’ll be racing on.”

Joe Vigil, who coached Deena Kastor and many other national cross country champions, agrees with this approach. “If possible,” he says, “survey the courses you’re racing and duplicate the challenges of the course as much as possible within your surrounding geography. Make it tough, as hard as you can make it, then run a weekly workout on it hard.”

Basic Training

Here are the key elements to take into account when designing cross country-specific workouts.

1. COURSES GO UP AND DOWN

Some cross country courses are pancake-flat, but these are the exceptions. Part of the appeal of cross country is that most races take place in parks or on golf courses, places of peace and tranquility, most of which feature some slight to severe elevation gains and losses. Spending time becoming proficient at going up and down
is the surest way to faster race times.

The San Luis Obispo chapter of the ASICS Aggies Running Club, which I coach, uses several workouts to adapt to the ups and downs of cross country.

Find a roughly mile-length course that is gradually uphill, preferably on a softer surface off the asphalt. Run the uphill portion at race effort to build strength. Once at the top, take a standard 3- to 5-minute recovery jog before heading back downhill, focusing on being fast and efficient. Do 3 to 6 repeats, depending on your weekly mileage. Early season we’ll finish uphill, while at the end of the season we’ll finish with a downhill repeat. The idea is not to run the downhill as fast as possible; instead it is to run fast, but controlled.

Over the course of a few weeks of doing these, the times on the uphill sections improve steadily, as expected, but most people see a dramatic improvement on the downhill sections. Early in the season, the difference in times between the uphill and downhill sections will usually be between 20 and 30 seconds. By the end of the season, the difference is more like 30 to 40 seconds, indicating greatly increased proficiency in running downhill.

The second workout I recommend involves doing tempo runs that start with a gradual uphill for 800m, then turning around and running 800m downhill, and repeating the sequence for the length of your normal tempo run. Maintain a tempo effort — strong and steady, but controlled — throughout. In the last few weeks of the season, increase the intensity by running the upsills at cross country race effort while keeping the downsills at tempo effort.

The final workout is a tempo run over rolling hills or on grass, dirt or woodchip trails — anything but a flat, even asphalt surface. (And don’t even think about doing these on a track during cross country season!) Siqueiros had Hasay do many of her tempo runs on a 800m grass field made up of two fields separated by a small hill. Each 800m has a short steep uphill and downhill to negotiate, plus it’s over grass, similar to the courses found in California.

2. DIRT, GRASS AND MUD
Uneven terrain, soft dirt, thick grass and mud all require additional energy to negotiate. Your knee lift is higher, the energy needed to maintain form on uneven surfaces is greater, your push-off is stronger and the energy returned from the push-off on soft surfaces is much less than the track or roads, all of which necessitates additional attention if you’re to become proficient.

Magill says, “I train for things I can improve and ignore things I can’t. You can’t directly train to be better at running through mud, but you can run hill repeats and long hills to improve knee lift, which, in turn, helps you with both hills and, voila, running through mud on cross country courses. I do 50 percent of my running on trails, too, so that I regularly utilize all the muscles associated with a varied and choppy stride, and trail running forces me to practice focusing on where my feet are landing.”

Siqueiros notes, “I’ll start off with simple fartlek on secure, even footing. As the season advances, move on to real cross country courses or surfaces.” He continues, “I’ll also just do our regular intervals, 400s, 800s, or mile repeats over cross country courses and terrain, grass, dirt, even sand. As the kids run these courses, they have to learn to maneuver over the various surfaces. I’ll hear from the kids, ‘I don’t like this or that surface.’ Unfortunately, we don’t always get to pick the course that our major race will be contested over.” Neither will you.

Given the increased muscular strength
OFF-TRACK TACTICS

AN IMPORTANT PART OF CROSS COUNTRY RACING

success is adapting your strengths as a runner to the various courses while minimizing your weaknesses. Additionally, patience and confidence in your race strategy are key virtues. High school coach Armando Siqueiros says, “What I first try to do is let the kids know that a cross country race is a race to the finish line. We talk about the ebb and flow of a race. I remind them what happens in the middle or beginning does not necessarily reflect what happens at the end. Therefore, don’t panic if things don’t seem to be going your way.”

National masters champ Pete Magill agrees, “When [your] effort level is disrupted, calmly and patiently climb back up on the horse. Return to the proper effort level without exceeding that effort level to do so.

“I’ve fallen twice in masters national cross country championship races,” he continues, “In the first race, I tried to hurry back to the front of the pack and ended up slowing, eventually finishing 30 seconds behind the leader. In the second race, I was patient; I returned to the correct effort level, caught the leaders a mile later, and won the race.” — J.R.

needed for effective cross country running, some supplementary work will help you train and race more effectively. In particular, focus on your core, hip flexors and lower legs. Magill offers the following exercise to address all these areas: “I’ll lie on my back, holding up one leg, and drawing the alphabet with my foot,” he says, “to re-integrate all the muscles in my lower legs, the better to handle the uneven terrain of cross country.” This exercise also requires a great deal of core and hip flexor strength to accomplish. Eccentric strengthening exercises of the Achilles tendon are also helpful, particularly for masters athletes who may have several years of mostly running in heeled shoes on level terrain behind them.

3. START FAST

For championship meets, the starting area is specified to be no less than a 300m straight line until you meet your first turn or narrowing. Not all courses provide a free and clear 300m, most provide less. Even if you have the full 300m, the imminent narrowing dictates a key rule of cross country: You must be able to get out quickly and efficiently from the gun without undue stress. Being left behind at this stage puts you at a disadvantage as the course narrows and passing becomes more tactical. Do you need to be in the lead at the first turn? No, but you don’t want to be last either. You want to get yourself in the best position possible without killing yourself to do so.

To prepare for this, Kara June, third at last year’s national club cross country championships, will do intervals of 200–400m on a flat grass field. She’ll do 6 to 12 repeats at a pace that’s 5–10 seconds per 400m faster than her cross country race effort. This effort is plenty fast enough to improve her mechanics, efficiency, speed and strength such that she can establish a solid position for herself the first 200–300m of a race and be able to settle into the race without undue stress or strain.

4. SLOW IN, FAST OUT

Most courses will have an obstacle such as a narrow bridge, a sharp turn around a tree, a single-track path, even a creek crossing at a key point that will force runners to slow into and accelerate out of the obstacle to maintain position. The athletes in the top positions are at a significant advantage as they have a clear path around or over these obstacles.

As you move back in the pack, the slowing into each obstacle is more severe as a greater number of people attempt to negotiate the obstacle. Similar to being at the end of a traffic jam, those at the back lose precious time, and they’re then forced to sprint with greater effort after the obstacle to try to regain position, thereby putting even more of a premium on developing the ability to repeatedly slow into an obstacle and accelerate out efficiently.

On her 200–400m grass intervals, June runs a square circuit. Unlike a track, where the shape of the 400m is an oval with gradual turns, her grass 400m is literally square, with 100m segments on all four sides and a sharp 90-degree turn at each corner. She runs these at a pace significantly faster than her target race effort, plus she is forced to slow into and accelerate out of each corner, learning the relatively quick five to 10 steps acceleration often needed to regain contact or establish position.

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