TIPS FOR THE TRAIL

By Patti Finke. M.S.

Trail running information.

The Benefits of Trails:

Endurance: the Kenyans can't be wrong. Training on the trails improves your endurance, VO2 max and lactate threshold depending on the distances and terrain you are running. We train our Portland Marathoners with one trail run a month starting at 8 miles and working up to 20 plus. We have found that 85% of the runners who do the trail training come within 15 minutes of their goal while only 50% of those who just do the road runs come within a half hour of their goal time

Strength: Imagine doing hundreds of squats and lunges, but not inside the gym. That's often what you do running on the trails especially if there are hills involved. Even if it's flat it takes more strength and many different muscles to maintain balance and propel forward off the dirt.

Proprioception: the ability to balance and have your feet feel what to do in addition to what your eyes tell you. This comes in handy to keep you upright when you trip on that root or rock. If you are going to be running that relay leg in the dark, it's much easier if your feet know what to do.

Focus: if you are a distance runner especially a marathoner, you know it takes lots of focus to stay on task for a couple of hours or longer. It takes concentration and focus to keep your eyes on the trail watching for roots, rocks mud and other changes.

Injury Prevention: if you are running lots of miles, that continual pounding can lead to injury. The soft surface and other benefits from above help keep runners from being injured

Variety and fun! There's nothing like running somewhere different, where the cars don't go, where you can commune with mother nature to really give you that runner's high.

The Risks

Injury: the moment you lose focus, the trail trolls reach out to grab you and you kiss the trail. This can result in sprained ankles, torn muscles and broken bones. Trail running with an existing injury can exacerbate that injury because of the twisting, uneven trail and hilly terrain.

Getting Lost: running alone in the wilderness without a map is not a smart thing to do. I've actually encountered runners going in the exact opposite direction than they thought.

Hypothermia: if you're out on the trail and a storm comes up, the temperature can drop 20 or more degrees.

Depletion/Dehydration: your body needs 6 -8 ounces of water for every 20 minutes of exercise. For runs over one hour, adding about 100 -200 calories carbohydrate every 30 minutes keeps blood sugar and liver glycogen levels high enough to give you energy to keep running.
Reducing the Risks

Proper footwear: I see runners show up at our trail runs wearing their oldest most worn out shoes to keep the good ones clean. To run on trails, you need to use your best shoes with heel stability, forefoot flexibility and cushioning because of the unevenness of the trail. Many manufacturers make trail shoes which have the characteristics needed for trail running. The traction of trail shoes in mud or soft dirt makes them invaluable.

Gear: There are lots of ways to carry stuff, the most popular being the fanny pack. If you're not familiar with the area, take a map and compass. If I'm going out in the wilds, I fold up a marathon blanket and stick it in the bottom of my pack along with a small first aid kit. Don't forget sunscreen, sunglasses and insect repellant

Food and Water: If you are going to be out over an hour, I suggest carrying water and carbos. The gels and bars are good sources, but need water to get to the best concentration to be absorbed. We like tootsie rolls, other candy, animal crackers and rice krispie goodies if we're going to be out a long time

Pace: the trail is a great strength builder, if you let it work for you instead of trying to fight it. We see that you need to run 30 - 60 seconds per mile slower on the trails. Run comfortably based on the conditions rather than trying to keep up a certain pace. Usually the trail trolls are waiting for the runners who have been working too hard and catch them when they relax for just that second.

Distance: start with a short distance and build the muscles slowly. Extend the distance as you get stronger and you will continue to get stronger and faster.

Hill techniques:

Uphill: take short quick steps (baby steps) as if riding a bicycle in low gear. Use your arms in a straight back and forward motion to help lift your legs and you opposite hip. Concentrate on relaxing your upper body and keeping your shoulders down.

Downhill: go for it! Lengthen out your stride to take advantage of the hill. Land on the balls of your feet with your knees bent. Swing your arms more across your body to help keep your balance and to rotate your hips to improve stride length. Keep weight forward by having your hips over the landing foot. Concentrate on using the muscles in the backs of your legs and coming up off your back toe to push you forward. Remember you can go a lot faster than you think and still be under control.

Transitions: strive to make a smooth but immediate transition in your form as you go from uphill to downhill or as the slope changes. Anticipate the changes in terrain and change your form and stride length accordingly.

Watch for these common mistakes:

Attacking the Uphill: a quick ticket to oxygen debt. You must concentrate on relaxing and metering out your energy over the hill. Many hills are steepest at the bottom and flatten out near the top. A well run hill has you picking it up at the top and into the downhill transition.

Overstriding Uphill: remember that the muscles of the legs are major pumps for the blood supply of oxygen and fuel while running. A short quick stride uphill helps supply more fuel and oxygen than a long slow one. This is the same reason that it is more efficient to use low gears and fast cadence when riding a bicycle uphill rather than high gears and a slow cadence.

Resting or Holding Back on the Downhill: if you do not accelerate on the downhill, you will lose the opportunity to get something for nothing. If you don't believe this, try running downhill with a pulse rate monitor and notice how much faster you can run at the same pulse rate than on the flat. A sure sign that you are holding back is the sound of "plopping" from your feet as you downhill. Work on increasing stride length and using your arm swing for balance. Landing on a straight leg results in knee pain, so remember to keep weight forward and land on a bent knee.

Not Thinking Ahead: look ahead for variations in the slope up or down and adapt to them immediately. If you have to wait until you are tying up from lactic acid uphill or hear the "plopping feet" downhill to change your form, it's too late and you have already wasted energy.

Another feature of trails is an occasional mud patch. I will give you permission to get your shoes dirty. The best footing is in the middle of the trail, any "picking your way" or "pussyfooting around the puddles" will result in mud all over (YOU WILL FALL DOWN!). Plant firmly, sometimes you need to pick up the pace a little to do this. If you slide, go with it and wait for the foot to catch before stepping forward. Some of us have been known to have splashing contests, to reward the muddiest person and just have fun with the conditions. If you've been in the mud, untie your shoelaces before they dry. You can rinse off your shoes with the hose or in the shower or wait for them to dry and brush off the mud with a stiff brush. The washer shortens the life of your shoes, the dryer is deadly.

The real key to trail running is to have fun. That's the key to long term running as well. Lean to enjoy the process, then the means (the end result) will be successful. I'm usually out on the trails some where. If you catch me, you can splash me.

Patti Finke, is an exercise physiologist, coach and fitness consultant with wY'east Consulting, inc. She is a founder and director of the Portland Marathon Training Clinic and Team Oregon. She has completed over 80 marathons and 80 ultramarathons, many of them on trails. She is the author of "Marathoning Start to Finish and many articles on training for local, national and international publications.