

# Off-road running – technique and training

An Edited Version by Terry Newlands

## Getting Started

Before you head off into the wilderness let's examine some basic things you should do prior to departure.

- Check the weather.
- Plan your route.
- Tell someone where you are going.
- Take adequate clothing and sustenance.
- Take a team-mate or three
- Don't forget a map, torch and compass if you are heading into the unknown
- A small first aid kit, including painkillers, sticking plasters, dressings, tape and antihistamines (if you are allergic).
- A lightweight space blanket could be a real life saver.

Obviously if you carry all the above and manage to still run you will derive great training benefit.



## Now For Some More Interesting Stuff

Off we go. Relax and place your feet with care. Avoid standing on top of slippery logs, roots and rocks. Place your feet in natural clefts and hollows where possible. With practice you will become amazingly skilled and adroit at rocketing along precarious byways.

Going up hills is best tackled with smaller steps; this is to save the quadriceps for later. These are usually destroyed racing your mate down the other side. The best approach to climbing is to establish a steady rhythm using slower smaller steps

*When running downhill always stay in control.*

Listen to your breathing, if you are breathing hard, that's fine but if you start to gasp, slow down and get back within your aerobic threshold. Remember, altitude does affect you.

Mud puddles are often best negotiated by running straight through the middle. It is the shortest distance and as most trampers walk around the edges you will find the edges are often deeper than the centre.

Take care when running through bush tracks. Tell friends not to follow too close behind as you can get lashed by springing branches. If you keep a respectable distance behind you have a better chance of seeing and avoiding any pitfalls.

If you are in the lead set a pace comfortable for your comrades. Check regularly that they are following OK. Stop at junctions and ensure everyone takes the right route.

Don't forget to drink regularly; even though the air temperature may be cool you are probably losing around a litre of fluid per hour.

The shortest route between two points is a straight line and running tight around the inside of bends is best where possible. If however the terrain is tricky we have to temper this approach. For example running down a slippery, scoured out clay track at speed, a good technique is to run diagonally from side to side and back in a zigzag fashion to check your speed and maintain control.

On a riverbed, one trades off the straight line approach with picking surfaces that offer faster running and/or avoiding unnecessary river crossings.

Gorse bushes are usually dealt to by taking a deep breath and brushing your way through at full speed (no place for wimps).



Crossing rivers is straightforward if you are careful. If you can't see the bottom, beware. I hope you can swim with your gear on and there are no big rocks or drops downstream. Shallow crossings say up to knee deep can generally be made in the direction of travel. Deeper crossings are made diagonally downstream and across the current. Link with a partner where possible, this gives more feet on the ground at one time and makes for stability. The faster you move down and across the river, the less resistance you offer to the current. Eye up your anticipated landing point on the far side before committing yourself. If you get into trouble run and swim furiously diagonally across the flow till you strike dry land. This is not a textbook method but it works.



Estimating stage times is difficult, talk to people with local knowledge where possible. For training runs over an average bush track you can work on one third the tramping time plus any rests as a rough guide.

If you are training for a hilly race train once or twice a week on the hills in the weeks leading up to the event. Don't run the hills hard in the last four or five days before the race however.

If you are racing over bush tracks get out and practice on them. You will strengthen up your muscles, tendons and ligaments, learn to place your feet better and improve balance, anticipation and coordination. You will generally run more efficiently, smarter and faster.

### Clothing and Apparel

Temperature and weather conditions change quickly in the mountains and also between features in the terrain such as an exposed ridge and sheltered valley.

For average conditions I would recommend a polypropylene top and running shorts as a good combination.

In cold and exposed conditions you will need your rain and windproof "shell garments" on or tights instead of shorts. In hot weather I would still wear or carry a poly-prop' top.

Layers of clothing will give you the flexibility to add or subtract as you require to maintain optimum temperature.

In hot weather you'll need to drink around 500ml an hour. This will mean carrying up to a couple of litres at a time if you are on a ridge with no water available.

For bush and scrub crashing or overgrown tracks especially subalpine scrub you'll need leg protection to stop getting badly scratched. Polyprop' tights, nylon over-trousers or gaiters are all suitable.

Vaseline or a similar lubricant is essential if you are prone to chaffing. Also try wearing clothes inside out with the seams on the outside for comfort.



### Footwear

Generally for off-road running you need a shoe with a good grip sole, some protection around the sides of the shoe where it scuffs against rocks etc. A lower than normal heel is desirable so you don't "roll over" when traversing along a slope. The sole needs to be thick enough to stop foot bruising when running over uneven surfaces.

Lightweight tramping boots also work well if you are not planning to run the entire course.

Trim toenails and toughen skin regularly, look after your feet. Vaseline rubbed between toes on abrasion prone areas can prevent blisters forming.