

Hills and Stairs – Technique Tips



The Ultra-Trail Australia course is riddled with hills and stairs. They are why we do it. If it wasn't for the hills and stairs you'd probably be off looking for a bigger and better challenge.

Hopefully most of you have had a chance for a few hard training sessions on both hills and stairs to strengthen your body and mind for the challenge ahead.

The technique you use for both climbing and descending can have a huge impact on how well your legs will survive through to the finish line.

Here are a few tips you might find useful for race day – practice them for the next three weeks to make sure they work for you.

Running Uphill: there are a few things you can focus on.

- Keep your posture upright and avoid leaning into the hill. This will allow you to use your glutes more and your quads less (you need your quads for the downhills)
- Try to maintain a high cadence and take short steps (your cadence will probably drop depending on how steep the hill is and your relative level of fitness, but keep it as high as you comfortably can)



- Think of it like using the granny gear on a mountain bike. Spinning your legs around quickly is easier on the muscles.
- You will almost always land on the front of your foot when you are climbing. If it isn't too steep then every now and then you can deliberately drop your heels so that they just touch the ground (for about 20-30 steps on each leg). This will give your calf muscles some brief respite from the workload.
- If it is very steep and feels difficult to physically continue running, then you are better off walking and saving some energy. The amount of time you might lose walking up a steep section of hill is negligible compared to the amount of time you can lose later in the race if you have "blown up"

Running Upstairs:

- Stay upright so you use primarily your glute muscles
- Take the stairs one at a time. This is easier on your heart and lungs and your quads than trying to tackle them two at a time.
- Depending on the depth and height of the stairs, try to get your whole foot on the step when you can. This is also relevant walking up stairs. If your foot lands flat (as opposed to on your toes on the front edge of the step) then your calf muscles will get a rest.

Walking Upstairs:

Is a lot more energy efficient than running up, so try to plan in advance where on the course you intend to walk. This can actually make a section like Nellies Glen something to look forward to rather than dread! **"Yay - a walking break"**



Downhill and Downstairs Technique

Descending is hard on your body, even with good technique. But it can be especially punishing if your technique is poor.

Your main focus should be on **taking short strides** and keeping your cadence high (175 – 185 steps/minute is a good guide. You can download a metronome app on your phone and use it in training to get a feel for what 175 – 185 feels like).

There is a tendency for people to try and “make up some lost ground” by running the downhill sections quickly. It is much easier on your heart and lungs, so it doesn’t feel like particularly hard work. Most people, unless taught otherwise, will increase their speed by lengthening their stride. This causes exponentially more impact on the body (up to 6 times body weight on steep downhill sections) and increases the likelihood of inflicting a DOMS (delayed onset muscle soreness) effect on your quads. The rest of the race won't be much fun if your quads are “dead”.

Running downstairs is similar. Use every step. Don't try and take them two at a time. If they are really steep there is often a handrail, so use the handrail to ease some of the load on your quads. Leki (hiking) poles can also be useful for this if you are worried about whether your quads or knees will survive the event.

If the stairs are very technical then you can use your arms as a type of counter balance. Keeping them high and wide can help to improve your stability as your body weight shifts from side to side.

Here is a video clip taken on everyone's favourite staircase the Furbers. It shows what has been discussed on how to safely climb and descend stairs.

