



Training for mountains without hills

By Hanny Allston –Find Your Feet

The Ultra-Trail Australia events have many exciting challenges, one of the most noteworthy being the large and numerous hills that runners will encounter in the Blue Mountains. As this event has expanded, so too has the spread of runners from across our vast country.

One of the greatest challenges that some of our Aussie runners are facing is preparing for this mountainous event when they live in a flat area. For instance, some of the runners I am working with are training in Broome where anything remotely resembling a hill is a very, very long way away.

Therefore, I wanted to share some suggestions for how to prepare for hills without hills.

Run on Trails

The shear nature of trails requires runners to be strong. As you bounce from foot to foot over the uneven surfaces of rocks, roots and sand there is a more holistic activation of your muscles. These are the same muscles that will activate when you run up and down a hill, such as your quadriceps, hamstrings and gluteal muscles. So, if you have the chance to hit the trails and even practice some faster speed endurance work on them, this is a really good training strategy.

'Heavy' Fast-packing

Fastpacking is the term used to describe fast hiking. One strategy that I have found highly beneficial for runners preparing for the UTA events is to load up their running vest pack with lots of weight and set out on a fast hike. The way I load up my pack is to use a 5 or 10L water bladder or wine cask filled with water. I put this in my vest pack and set off for an hour or two. The muscles required to hike with this weight are similar to those employed to run up and down a hill. Therefore, this can be a really great way to get stronger and more resilient by May.

Uphill treadmill running

Whilst I personally detest running on a treadmill, they occasionally have some usefulness. Conducting a hill interval session on a treadmill can help to replicate the nature of hills. Set the treadmill to an 8-10% incline and carry out a session. You may also like to finish the session off with a short period of time on a stair climber machine.

Flat treadmill running for downhill

Again, desperate times may call for desperate measures, a great one being running on a flat treadmill. Evidence suggests that running on a flat treadmill has some impact similarities to downhill running. Whilst this strategy may be somewhat useful, be careful not to overdo it.

Get out of the saddle

Standing out of the saddle on a bike or stationary bike is really hard work. Powering down through your quads without sitting on the bike seat activates similar muscles to those you use to run or hike up a steep hill or set of stairs. Building in some out-of-the-saddle work into your training could be really helpful. One suggestion would be to do 10-15mins of out-of-the-saddle training before you start a fartlek session or tempo run to help simulate what it feels like to run on the flat after you have just climbed a steep hill.

Go for a wander

Walking activates slightly different muscle groups to running. And in the Blue Mountains we will likely find ourselves walking at times. Therefore, the more efficient you are at walking the less emotionally stressful you will find this activity on race day. It will also help to build strength. Therefore, add in a little fast hiking into your training program.

Take a pilgrimage

If you have the luxury of sneaking a weekend away over summer or the Easter holiday period, then this could be really helpful for your training. Rest a little before flying to somewhere which has luscious hills to play in. After the rest earlier in the week you can go 'a little bit nuts' over the weekend and maximize some time spent in the hills.

Small can be beautiful

Small inclines or stairs should never be overlooked. If all you have time and access to is a small lump in the local park then just enjoy switching off the

brain and running up and down it a zillion times. Just like sand granules on a beach, small things really do add up.

Get strong

See if you can find a local strength guru to give you a hand with a strength program specific to hill running. This can include body weight exercises, skipping, hopping, single leg activities and some weighted gym work. Exercises could include: lunges, squats, deadlifts, single leg drills, gluteal activation work, calf raises and isometric holds, core work and much more. Sometimes you might like to do your strength session before you go for a run so that you can learn to 'run heavy' as you might feel after climbing up a large hill on race day.

Get sandy

My last suggestion comes with a little caution... sand. As we all remember from our childhoods, running on sand can be somewhat exhausting. Adding a little sand running into your program can help. However, be careful! Sand running places great loads on tendons and soft tissues, such as the Achilles Tendon and your hip flexors. Therefore, rather than setting off for an isolated sand dune running session, I recommend incorporating only a little running on sand during a standard session.

In summary, whilst I firmly believe there is no perfect substitute for running on hills, if you find yourself living in a region void of steepness then the above suggestions could help you feel more confident come the race day in May. Start carefully and gently on the path to adding hills because if you have been training on the flat-lands for a while you don't want to shock your running legs and risk injury. Finally, be gentle on yourself. Whilst hills may not be your strong point, some of us have no flat regions to train on! So where we might have power on the hills, you might be superhuman on the flats!

Best wishes with the training!

Hanny Allston