



The Benefits of Training on all Surfaces

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It's not rocket science right? As the UTA events are all primarily on trail, following the principle of specificity and training on trail has to be the best way to prepare right?

Not quite. While the benefits of training on trails are countless and will indeed assist greatly in your skill sets development, trail fitness and strength to handle the constant elevation changes, it should not be the only surface that is utilised throughout your UTA training program.

For most of us that isn't a problem. Not all of us live close to trails and we all have to utilise varying surfaces at one time or another. I'm here to say every so often embrace the black top, smash the track and occasionally even flirt with the treadmill.

From an athlete point of view, I can vouch for the benefits that road running and regular track sessions have had on my best trail running. In 2012 and 2013 I won 3 of the biggest trail ultras in Australia (including TNF100). These were preceded by a long habitation in the city where breakfast lunch and dinner was road and dessert was track running. While moving to the Blue Mountains in late 2011 undoubtedly made me a more skilled, versatile (and less injured) runner, training a lot more on trails did start to erode my speed endurance and I began to get stuck running a lot of my sessions much easier than I was used to. Consequently I noticed a small reduction in my cruising pace, top end fitness and speed endurance (having the ability to go harder for longer).

Road Running.

Road running may not be the best thing for your body, but it does bring many training benefits. Road running enables you to forget about the terrain and find your rhythm in a way that is just not possible on a twisty trail scattered with obstacles.

Road running can help you acquire the rhythm, running economy (such as a high cadence) and speed. Trail running usually involves a lot of pacing to the terrain, 'meandering' through the twisty forest trails, 'drifting the downs' as they are, for most, a time to recover. On the road, there's no hiding, and a consistent effort and finely tuned pacing is always required. Throw in a road race too every now and then to keep in touch with what it means for long, constant efforts. After all, there are significant sections of the UTA course on fire trail that for all intents and purposes is a tarless road. This style of running will ALWAYS come in handy no matter what event.

Track Running.

Nothing tells you were you're at with your fitness more than a track session. Thought you could belt out 8 x 1km reps only to get to half way and throw in the towel? Did the lactic leave you curled up in the foetus position? I can't recall seeing anyone 'playing' the 20 x 400m game on the trails, (although to be fair, hill sessions on the trails can be great).

Incorporating track is not for everyone mind you but for anyone wishing to take their running to the next level, incorporating a track session once a week will do just that. Simply put, the best and only way to learn how to run faster is to get used to running fast. Your body will respond both on a cellular and muscular level and your fitness levels will skyrocket.

For the UTA events, a combination of middle (400m to 1200m) intervals and long (1200-2km) intervals (or mixed in a pyramid session) are going to be the best sort of workouts. The duration of your intervals and recovery periods will be dictated by your level and ability.

The middle distance efforts, run at faster than your 5k pace will improve your lactic acid utilisation and increase your resistance to fatigue (and build mental strength). You will also increase your raw speed through these efforts, your running economy and technique.

The long intervals work a slightly different energy system and these should be run at a speed between your 5km and 10km pace; a sustained pace that makes conversation difficult and feels hard. What results will be stamina to burn as your cruising pace increases. You will also recover quicker from hard efforts, always a handy asset to have on the trails.

A track session is also just great bang for your buck. If you've got 2 hours to go and run easy on the trails a couple of times a week, do yourself a favour and swap one up for an hour session on the track. Not only will you get more out of it, you'll also double the endorphin hit too 😊

Treadmill Running.

The 'dreadmill' is not something to be ridiculed and if there is something I encourage all my athletes to invest in, it's a treadmill. Not only is it incredibly convenient, but it's very difficult to make an excuse not to train when it's sitting there right in front of you. But beyond that, it's like your own personal all terrain machines.

Can't get to the mountains? Then use the inclination functions to create your own hills right in the comfort of your own home. Want to run intervals, progressive runs or negative split sessions? It's all very easy on a treadmill where you are in control with the press of a few buttons.

Lastly, there's no better way to combat boredom and develop mental toughness than running a long treadmill session. If you can get through an hour on the treadmill, you can get through many more hours on the trail.

I hope this little piece has given you some encouragement to keep your training program varied and incorporating training on all surfaces. While trail is going to make up the majority of your long runs, don't forsake the road, track and treadmill for some of the shorter ones.