

Trail Running 101

If you are embarking on first trail race or just looking to get off the beaten path, then you need to be prepared. Trail running is a separate sport altogether from road running & it is important to be prepared. The environment, terrain, attitude of participants & overall focus are very, very different. It is this difference that draws runners & non-runners alike to the sport. This essay is meant to be a basic introduction to trail running & though it covers some basic concerns, please recognize that trail running is meant to be experienced, not written about. So get out on the trails & enjoy.

One of the reasons many people are wary of trail running is that they are afraid of getting injured. The uneven terrain, coupled with rocks, twisting paths & severe drops & rises, causes many uninitiated folks to worry about what might happen. Admittedly, it does take a little while to become adept at “seeing” the trail but the following recommendations should help you get started feeling comfortable on the trails.

- **Eyes on the Trail.** One of the hardest things to do when you begin trail running is to avoid the temptation to look at all the natural beauty. This is a sure way to get fall & get bloody palms & knees. As long as you are running on the trail, it is imperative that you keep your eyes on it. There are so many dips & twists, rock & stumps that you will find yourself tripping & falling. If you want to be looking around at your surroundings (& by all means please feel free to), then stop or walk. Keep in mind that if you look up or behind you while running, you will go down!

- **3 Feet.** Start by keeping your eyes focused on the trail about three feet in front of you. Do not try to process every twig & stone that approaches, this will exhaust you, mentally & physically, very quickly. Instead, let the sensory information that your eyes are picking up wash over you. You don't have to think about where to put your foot, your mind-body connection will begin “know” where your foot should go. This will not happen right away, in fact you will probably have a hard time sort of letting go, but if you continue to focus 3 feet in front of you the process takes care of itself. Be patient with yourself.

- **Slow Down.** Perhaps the cardinal rule of trail running is to slow down. There is a select group of trail runners that burn up the single tracks hurling themselves at breakneck speeds, but even this group had to slow down when they began trail running. Do not expect to maintain the same pace that you maintain on the roads or the track. This aspect of slowing down actually highlights one of the profound differences between trail runners & road runners. Trail runners seem to enjoy the process more than (or as much as) the results, while road runners are far more focused on the finish & their time. As a trail & road runner, I enjoy them both but I find I am a much less competitive or time driven runner on the trails. I enjoy the process of trail running much more than I do in road running.

- **Walk when Necessary.** Do not hesitate to walk on the trails. A 10K trail race will feel like a 10 miles. This is because it takes much more work to run on trails. Your entire body will need to work hard to keep you rolling along & you need to take this into

consideration. Many trail runners will walk steep uphill & downhill sections of trails, to conserve the energy necessary to complete the run. It is very important to place your pace expectations aside when you first start trail running & be conservative. Being willing to walk when necessary is an essential attitude if you want to have a pleasurable & safe trail run.

- **Equipment.** Many runners will feel that they can't begin trail running because they are not adequately equipped. This is a misunderstanding. If you are already a runner then there is nothing extra you will need to begin trail running. Trail running shoes are NOT essential equipment for trail running. Many runners will run in their regular road running shoes for years before they purchase a trail running shoe. **Trail running shoes do protect your feet and toes from trauma better than road running shoes, though. They also tend to have better traction, and should dry better than road shoes. Note: before you even think of purchasing Gore Tex shoes, keep in mind that if you cross a stream, the water will STAY IN YOUR SHOES until you empty them out.**

If you begin to run for distances over 6 miles, especially in the heat of Summer, you may need to begin carrying your own water on the trail & there are simple methods of doing so, from water bottles with hand straps to hydration devices that strap on your waist or back.

- **Creek crossings.** One major safety concern that will arise is crossing creeks that have water in them. When you reach a creek, look down & see how deep the water is & what objects you might step on. If you can see clearly then just step in & avoid any rocks or branches, if the water is muddy then you will want to slowly shuffle through the water to insure that the creek doesn't suddenly get deeper or that there are not any other major obstacle that might cause you to trip. But whatever you do, do not be afraid of getting your shoes wet...this is one of the most fun experiences of trail running.

- **Passing.** Because the majority of trail running is done on single tracks, or one lane trails, it is important to know the proper protocol to passing. Many experienced trail runners will tell you that there is no protocol, however, if you will announce yourself as passing on the left most runners will move over to the right to make room for you to pass. Please recognize that some runners will not move over & then you will be forced to make your own way around them. It is preferable to do this at a place on the trail where you will have plenty of distance to get around the runner without running into any obstacles along the trail. Once you have found a spot be sure to accelerate quickly, pass on the left & maintain this faster pace until you are completely clear of the runner you have passed.

The trail is out there beckoning & when you get out on it take in a deep breath & be thankful of the open spaces left to us to enjoy. When trail running you are opening to the primal understanding of what we, as a species, were born to do: cover ground.

This article is meant to be a basic introduction to trail running & was originally written for the "Toughest Race in Texas," a 10K trail race around the St. Stephen's campus. Bad Ben edited certain parts for local consumption.