

THE GREAT ESCAPE CHALLENGE

Saturday 21st- 23rd May 2010 . Brecon Beacons, Wales



Your training schedule:

While teams' final placings won't be decided on the time it takes them to get between the challenges, fail to hit the deadlines and those challenges will be 'closed' before you arrive. "The off-road running and cycling between the challenges should be achievable by anyone who can constantly run for 60 minutes without being too out of breath," says Cunningham, the course designer. "The real fitness test comes in some of the challenges, where you'll be sprinting up hills, working on agility and strength to pull your team through, all against the clock – straight after having finished a run or cycle, so it'll test every aspect of your fitness."

Absolute beginners running plan

Whatever your level of fitness you should comfortably be able to build from nothing to running continuously for 60 minutes in the space of eight weeks. All you need to do is make a commitment to run at least three times a week and follow this simple run-walk programme which will gradually ease you towards the goal.

A few things to bear in mind:

Allow at least a day between runs when you begin.

If in doubt, slow down. You should be able to hold a conversation while you run. Respecting your body is the best route to progression.

Walk purposefully, and be strict with your run/walk timings.

Don't be afraid to repeat a week, or drop back a week. Everyone's different.

TAKE HEART - YOU WILL GET THERE!

The Schedule

WEEK 1: Run one min, walk 90 seconds. Repeat eight times. Do three times a week.

WEEK 2: Run three mins, walk one min. Repeat six times. Do three times a week.

WEEK 3: Run eight mins, walk two min. Repeat three times. Do three times a week.

WEEK 4: Run 12 mins, walk one min. Repeat three times. Do three times a week.

WEEK 5: Run 15 mins, walk one min, run 15 mins. Do three times a week

WEEK 6: Run 30 mins, walk one min, run 30 mins. Do three times a week.

WEEK 7: Run 45 mins, walk one min, run 15 mins. Do three times a week.

WEEK 8: Run 60 mins continuously.

Tactics and techniques

If you've never run off-road, you'll notice some key differences. "Because the terrain is changing all the time, you'll find it hard to get a rhythm going, and as there'll be more lateral movement, you'll be using peripheral muscles around the ankles and hips and in the quads and glutes," explains Stan Swartz, author of *Trail Running: From Novice to Master* (Mountaineer Books, £9.68 from www.amazon.co.uk).

Stay light: "Run as if on eggshells," Swartz advises. "You need to adapt to the terrain much more quickly, and this will keep you more alert." Also try not use one leg as the "plant" leg to land heavily on, and the other as the "dive" or push-off" leg – each leg should do these actions interchangeably.

Spot the ball: When running downhill, use the balls of your feet and not your heels for more speed, less pounding and greater control.

Go short: "Keep your head up and chest forward, and shorten your stride when going uphill," Swartz says. "Relax and focus on whatever rhythm you can to get you up and over each hill with relative ease."

Cut corners: "Corners are a great point to catch competitors," Swartz explains. Practice bursts of speed when rounding corners, using any banking to propel you out faster than you entered them.

Make a splash: It's possible to cross a stream while barely wetting your feet. "High-step across as quickly as possible, allowing your feet to touch down only for a fraction of a second," he explains.

Injury Hotspot

Because of the uneven ground and often slippery conditions, tripping up is an unavoidable hazard of off-road running. "It's your ankles that are most vulnerable, so make sure to protect them from injury before it's too late," advises Swartz.

Strengthening: Take a 50cm length of rope and tie a 500g weight on each end (or a can of food). With your feet hanging off the edge of a table, hang the rope over the end of your shoe and lift the weight as many times as you can, maintaining control at all points. Repeat with your foot pointing to the left and to the right. Aim for 30 reps in each position.

Warm-up: Sit on the floor, bending one leg up so you're grasping your lower leg with one hand and your foot with the other. Rotate your ankle clockwise and anti-clockwise. Do 10 to 20 swings then switch legs.



Explosive speed

It's during the challenges where you'll earn your team points for beating the clock, and it's raw speed that'll get you there. Here are a few moves to sprinkle into the mix twice a week to give you a head-start:

DEPTH JUMPS: Step off a 50 to 70cm high box or stair, then jump up from both legs as high as possible. Quickness off the ground is the key to this drill - react as if the ground was covered in burning ash and you had no shoes on. Repeat five to eight times.

ALTERNATE BOUNDS: Leap forward off your right leg as far as you can, so that your left leg and right arm go forward as you jump. Land on the ball of your left foot and immediately bound off it explosively, leaping forward with your right leg and left arm extended. To make it harder, bound up a hill. Do 10 bounds per leg in each set. Do three sets, resting 60 seconds after each.

SINGLE-LEG HOPS: Stand on your right leg with your knee slightly bent. Bend your knee, swing your arms, and hop forward as far as you can, landing on your right foot. Immediately repeat the movement. After you've hopped six times, rest 15 seconds, then repeat with your left leg; that's a set. Do three sets and rest 30 seconds after each.

POWER SKIPPING: You remember how to skip. Make it explosive by pushing forcefully off the ground with each skip and lifting the knee of your forward leg to your chest. Exaggerate lifting the knees to get the greatest benefit. Do 16 skips per set. Do three sets, resting 60 seconds between sets.

RUN LIKE FOREST GUMP: Speed requires efficiency. If you're wasting movement you're wasting seconds. A good model, believe it or not, is Tom Hanks as Forrest Gump. Complete this drill and you might well have earned yourself a box of chocolates.

1 LEG ACTION: Every efficient working machine operates in a circular fashion. Your legs are no different. Land on the balls of your feet and roll to the toes, keeping a 4- to 6-inch forward lean. Heels should never touch the ground and, when elevated, should be close to your backside.

2. ARM ACTION: Make sure your hands come over your shoulders, and behind your hips," says Lester. Keep your arms bent 90 to 100 degrees, and don't clench your fists. (It causes muscle tension.) The faster you swing your arms, the faster your legs move. Sceptical? Jog in place, then accelerate arm movement. Your legs will automatically follow.

3 STRIDE LENGTH: This is the distance travelled with each step. To measure yours, have someone count the number of times your right foot strikes the ground during a 50-metre sprint. Don't make the common mistake of reaching out with your foreleg prior to the foot striking the ground. This lands the foot well ahead of the knee and brakes your momentum.

The Bike Program

"This is essentially weight-training on a bike," says Shane Sutton, Welsh national cycling coach.

A Commonwealth Games gold and silver medalist, two-time Olympian, and Milk Race winner, Sutton has forgotten more than we'll ever know about building muscle and fitness through cycling. In addition to strengthening and developing the quadriceps, hamstrings, calves, glutes and hip flexors, hill riding offers unbeatable aerobic training for events like the Great Escape. This workout can be done on a road, mountain or stationary bike.

If you're cycling outdoors, find a moderately steep, quarter-of-a-mile-long hill (slightly shorter if you're riding off-road). Clip or strap your feet to the pedals - and don't cycle in running shoes. To better protect your knees, says Sutton, wear stiff-soled cycling shoes. The workout consists of four high-effort climbing intervals. Recover between the intervals by pedalling back down the slope to your starting place and circling there for 30 seconds.

The Warm-up

Begin with 10 minutes of pedalling on flat or slightly graded terrain. Pick a gear in which you can spin at a cadence of 90 to 100 revolutions per minute (rpm). An easy way to keep track of this is to periodically count the times your right leg comes up in 10 seconds, then multiply by six. If you're using a stationary bike, choose a resistance that allows you to spin at this rate.

The Workout

First Interval: Shift to a slightly harder gear - one that lets you take your first trip up the hill at a rate of 60 to 70 rpm. Don't stand or get out of the saddle. You should arrive at the turnaround point winded but not exhausted. Recover by pedalling back down the hill in an easy gear at a cadence of 95 to 110 rpm. Again, if you're using a stationary bike, choose resistance settings that allow you to maintain these same cadences.

SPEED INTERVAL: On your next climb, use the same gear or resistance as in the first interval, but increase the pace to 70 to 80 rpm. Your breathing should be heavy but controlled, and you should feel a burn in your thighs as you approach the top of the hill. Get out of the saddle if necessary. Recover by pedalling back down in an easy gear, spinning at 95 to 110 rpm.

POWER INTERVAL: Perform your third interval in the hardest gear or at the greatest resistance you can manage, pedalling at 30 to 40 rpm. However, do not get out of the saddle. If you're really struggling, shift to an easier gear that you can sustain right to the top. Recover as you did for the speed interval. (If you have knee problems or pain, steer clear of this interval, or at least ease up on the gear.)

SPINNING INTERVAL: For your final climb, shift to your easiest gear or resistance and try to maximise your rate of turnover. (In other words, pedal fast up the hill at 75 to 85 rpm.) When you reach the turnaround point, start descending immediately in the same gear.

THE COOL-DOWN: Ten minutes of pedalling in an easy gear or at a low resistance on level ground at 90 rpm.