

Taking it Off Road

By John Klich

Trail running is as natural as running could ever be. The first people to pick up the pace and start striding along did so not on roads, tracks, or treadmills, but on dirt paths, animal trails, and in open meadows. This was the way people first ran. It was trail running and it made them strong and balanced and it can make you a better runner too. Many runners are recognizing the advantage of taking their training to the trails and strengthening their road performance in the process.

The variability in terrain makes trail running uniquely challenging. Hills and descents are typically steeper, the ground is uneven and can frequently change in consistency, and trails are often complicated with roots, rocks and narrow twisting turns. These characteristics of trail running place a set of demands on the trail runner that are different from road running. Understanding how the body adapts to these demands helps one appreciate the benefits of trail running.

Collateral leg muscles work to stabilize the ankle and foot – helping to later prevent shin splints and other running-related maladies. A strong and supple core develops as the abdomen and back muscles strengthen and provide lateral agility and responsiveness. This dynamic and powerful core becomes the foundation for balance and stability, also assisting in impact absorption on descents. The physiological range of exertion is much broader. Heart rates typically range from 70 to 95% of MHR (maximum heart rate) during a single trail run. Similar to a “fartlek” run, the peaks in effort are unstructured; however, on the trail, the intensities are dictated by the demands of the terrain.

Perhaps one of the most appealing aspects of trail running is the decreased impact on the joints and back as the foot strike takes place on softer surfaces. Many long time road runners have found renewed enjoyment going off road, giving their knees and other joints a reprieve from the hard impact of pavement and concrete.

Although many fear the dreaded “twist my ankle on a tree root” scenario, the same risks hold for road running. It is easy enough to catch a curb or fall victim to a careless motorist while running on roads. The key to making a safe transition into trail running is to recognize that although it is running, it is not the same as road running. As such, trail running should be treated like any new activity. Recognize that there is a learning curve and take your time to become acquainted with the unique characteristics of trail running. Here are some suggestions to consider if you’re planning on introducing trails into your running program;

Start with one trail session per week. Try substituting one medium to hard road session a week with a trail run. Integrating trails into a portion of your program can give your running an edge without compromising your mileage or speed.

GET OUT THERE

SALTYDOG Trail Runners

Join SALTYDOG for casual group runs on trails in and around the Greater Toronto Area. Members receive a quarterly newsletter and access to online resources including a newsletter archive, maps and race calendar. SALTYDOG promotes trail running at all levels and aims to build the trail running community.

info@salty-dog.ca
www.salty-dog.ca



Toronto Bruce Trail Club

For a slower pace, hit the trails with the Toronto Bruce Trail Club. The Club is the largest of nine member clubs supporting the Bruce Trail Association. They maintain 100K of the Toronto Section of the Bruce Trail, running along the Niagara Escarpment between Kelso in Milton and Terra Cotta near Orangeville. When the real work is done, club members enjoy group hiking trips.

information@torontobrucetrailclub.org
www.torontobrucetrailclub.org

Start off with shorter runs. Give your body time to progress and adapt to the new demands you are putting on it. Your leg stabilizers and core muscles will need time to develop before you can go out for a 90 minute trail run; or else you'll be risking aches, pains, and possibly injury.

Slow everything down. Speed comes after caution. Your pace should be at least 10 to 25% slower on the trail than it is on the road.

Keep your eyes open. Moving at anything faster than a walking pace along a trail requires that you diligently scan the immediate two to three meters ahead of your feet to identify hazards. If you start gazing off into the woods, you're asking for a dirt sandwich.

Shorten your stride. This will give you more ground contact time and enable you to negotiate technical terrain more safely.

So if you're looking to reinvigorate your running, consider getting back to the way people first ran and take it to the trails. If nothing more, the change in scenery and comfort of nature will breathe new life into your runs.

John Klich has been running for 14 years and has completed runs up to and including marathon distances, most memorably the Yukon River Trail Half Marathon. John organizes SALTDOG Trail Runners in the G T A. He is a Running Free sponsored athlete and holds CSCS and CanFitPro PTS certifications. He works as an Advanced Care Paramedic with Toronto EMS. You can contact John via e-mail to info@salty-dog.ca.

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GET OFF ROAD HERE

In town

Don Valley – www.city.toronto.on.ca
Watch out for mountain bikers! Some great climbs, technical terrain and views. Access the trails through Sunnybrook Park or the Don Valley Brickworks.

High Park – www.highpark.org
High Park is located at 1873 Bloor Street West. Make sure to do a swing by the High Park Zoo to catch a glimpse of bison, peacocks, deer and llamas!

Outta' town

Bruce Trail – www.bruce-trail.org
Extending over 800K from Niagara to Tobermory, the Bruce Trail offers exceptional trail running opportunities. Try Mono Cliffs, Forks of the Credit and Dundas Valley.

Oak Ridges Moraine – www.orta.on.ca
With over 200K of hiking trails extending from Albion Hills to Rice Lake, the Oak Ridges Moraine is a great place to run some trails.

Conservation Halton – www.conservationhalton.on.ca
Any of the HRCA parks offer excellent trail running options. With most of them situated along the Niagara Escarpment, you'll be sure to enjoy some good climbs and technical terrain. Try Rattlesnake Point, Kelso and Hilton Falls.

Toronto and Region Conservation Authority – www.trca.on.ca
The TRCA has a variety of parks well suited for trail running. Check out Albion Hills and Rouge Park.



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UPCOMING EVENTS

September 8
SALTDOG Urban Trail Run
Night run starts at 8:15 p.m.
High Park, Toronto
www.salty-dog.ca

September 17
MEC 5 Peaks Trail Running Series
5K Sport and 11K Enduro start at 10 a.m.
Mono Cliffs Provincial Park, Orangeville
www.5peaks.com

October 1
Run for the Toad
25K and 50K trail runs start at 9:30 a.m.
Pinehurst Park, Paris
www.runforthetoad.com

Check out our G T A Sports and Outdoor Calendar for a complete list of upcoming trail running events.

