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MASTERING THE MOUNTAINS

BY BEN DUFFUS

Photo by Sunny Lee

Several years ago, being the enthusiastic teenage runner that I was, I found myself as a junior on the Australian Mountain Running team, heading off to the world championships in Slovenia. I was obviously thrilled to be representing my country — and worried. My background was track races, so I knew little about properly running on mountains.

Fortunately, some of the older, more-experienced mountain runners in my area took me under their wings and out on some training runs. The learning curve was as steep as the terrain! On our first outing, I found myself peering down a seemingly vertical descent, wondering if this was some kind of twisted initiation test. Was I seriously meant to run down that thing?! Indeed — downward my mentors charged, their light and fast steps pitter-pattering down a somehow stable route.

Next was my turn. At first, I was simply trying too hard — instead of letting grav-

ity do most of the work, I would lean back and take big, long, loping strides downhill. A great way to maximise the eccentric loading, but which consequently quickly smashed my quads. Just like with any skill, developing mountain-running abilities takes practice, practice, and practice. And over time, mountains became my strength.

An important aspect of being efficient descenders — one which might sound counterintuitive — is minimising braking forces. This can be achieved by leaning forward slightly from the ankles (to 'fall down' the hill) and increasing cadence (think fast steps and shorter strides). Meanwhile, your foot should be landing directly underneath your knee, as close to it as possible.

Just as on flat trails, when descending mountains look a few meters ahead and not at your feet. Develop your technical skills by picking out terrain that will challenge your ability. Look for the most stable route down loose terrain, and, through re-

peated successful descents, you will learn to let go of fear and trust your ability for picking a safe line down.

Even as a youngster, I immediately appreciated the technical requirements of running downhills. What took me a little longer to understand was that running uphill is also very different to running on flat ground. Efficient uphill running requires short, high-cadence strides, as trying to bound up with long strides will rapidly fatigue even the fittest of athletes.

Another shocker was the reality of walking uphill. Being told that I should walk, in a race!, seemed insulting. However, when an incline gets very steep, you can only run with super-short strides — but by switching to hiking, you can lengthen your stride and not waste as much energy bouncing up and down. You want to be taking long steps when hiking, but still trying to keep the cadence as high as you can (which inevitably will be lower than when running).

Nowadays I like to get my arms involved when hiking by pushing down on my leading leg (just above the knees) with the same arm. Though some of the athletes I coach don't find this very comfortable, and they prefer a more upright stance. In this case, on really steep climbs put your hands on your waist with your thumbs hooked behind you and still try to slightly lean forward.


For longer, or super-steep, mountains, poles are probably the best way to take advantage of your upper body's strength in ascending. The key is to plant the poles down firmly while still pointing the tips behind you, then driving down on the straps (rather than gripping the poles tightly) and pushing off hard. On really steep slopes, planting two poles at a time proves most efficient — but on less-steep slopes, it may be more comfortable to alternate which pole you plant (similar to swinging your arms while running). Just make sure to get comfortable using poles in training, if you are planning to effectively use them on race day.

The journey of becoming a better moun-

tain runner can start with something as simple as including plenty of elevation change on your long and easy runs — and next aim to include some hill repeats. Initially, focus on uphill reps, with sessions consisting of around 20min of very hard efforts on hills (that take 3-7min to ascend), with long recoveries between. As race day approaches, transition to slower-tempo efforts up longer hills, for a total of 30-60min uphill running (making room for short recoveries in between).

And doing some reps on hills so steep that you have no choice but to hike them will help you become a faster uphill hiker. If such a gradient isn't available, try loading up a pack with several kilograms of water — suddenly every hill will feel a lot steeper! Once you've started walking, avoid the common trap of refusing to switch back to running. If the gradient of the climb eases off, you should be ready to immediately start running again (and the reverse applies when the terrain steepens). An example session for honing this skill would be to break up a series of 6min hill reps into three lots of running for 1min, then hiking fast for 1min.

Experienced runners will benefit from including some downhill reps during their peak 2-6 weeks of training leading up to their event. Consider this example session for developing your descending speed, and for conditioning your quads: Run hard uphill and downhill on a stretch that normally takes 7min to ascend, taking a 2min rest at the bottom, and then repeating the whole process twice more.

Of course, the best way to become better at running mountains is to run in the mountains. But for those without such access, stair-running, or high amounts of repetitions of exercises like step-ups and lunges, will also help build the necessary strength. Developing your mountain-running ability can take both a lot of time and effort — but the places it'll take you and thrills you'll experience flying downhill will surely be worth it! 

Ben is an elite ultra marathon runner with podium finishes all around the globe. If you want help pursuing your trail-running goals, he also offers online coaching at Mile27.com.au.

**SURVIVAL
MODE TENDS
TO KICK IN WHEN
WE REALISE THAT
WE HAVE PERHAPS
BITTEN OFF MORE
THAN WE CAN
CHEW.**

Photo by Alexis Berg