

Training Matters – Cross Country

1. Why do Cross Country Races?

The team: doing a club cross country race it's all about the "team". Times no longer matter, even for the same courses done annually your times will vary due to different conditions. It's all about the placings. How many other club runners did you beat? Did you score for the team? Did you push other club runners down the placings? How well did the team do overall?

At the finish there is a lot more vocal encouragement. Your fellow club members will shout for you and when you're finished you have a chance to shout for the team members still to finish. Maybe it will encourage a final sprint to gain a few extra places!

The social side: cross country races are a lot more social than individual races. There is more hanging about at the start and finish - find the club gathering by the club tent or club flag and have a right old chat. How are you going to do, or usually getting the excuses in that you're not going to do well as you've had a cold in the week but then have a great race! What's the course like, what to watch out for (muddy sections, hills etc). Then there is a chance to catch up with the opposition you know, especially runners of a similar speed to yourself, either coming across them around other club areas or at the start and finish and again have a right good chat.

To become a better, "all round" runner: doing flat road races tends to exercise the same muscles. Cross country races will tend to give "a full body workout". The rougher, rutted and muddy trails will strengthen the feet, legs and hips as well as improving your balance. The constant change of pace (start, hills, bendy sections, finish) will give the lungs a real workout, increasing your Vo2 level (ability to get oxygen to the muscles), along with improving your arm strength and running form.

That's the physical side but it should also strengthen up your mental side as well with the harder running and the colder weather to contend with.

Races are more interesting than road races: cross country courses are varied and scenic, especially the SCCL ones. Plenty of different sections, mud, hills, trails water etc. Runners are also more bunched up. This gives more opportunity to run against your opposition or fellow club members. All good to give motivation and gauge your performance.

More forgiving on the joints: road race courses are over hard tarmac surfaces. This can give your joints a real pounding. Give your joints a break and run on the softer surfaces of a cross country race.

2. Ensure you have suitable shoes to race in

Cross country races courses have mud, roots, ruts, loose stones, hills etc. even some have stream crossings. Road trainers just won't cut it! They won't stop you slipping all over the place, letting your opposition pass you and risk injury. You will need shoes that will give great grip on these surfaces.

Elite runners run in "spikes" - lightweight racers with screw in metal spikes on the shoe sole.



These may not be suitable for runners who have any kind of biomechanical problem as they offer minimal support and cushioning. They can also cause problems over hard surfaces such as tarmac or concrete as the spikes won't dig in for the grip. A better alternative, at our level, are "fell running" shoes, some people refer to these as "stud" shoes (although football boots are also called studs).



These have deep lugs on the shoes sole to dig into the ground and give excellent grip. Again, there is low cushioning and support. They won't be suitable for longer races (10km and above). For longer races and where the mud is not too extensive "trail shoes" may be a better alternative. They still have lugs on the sole but these are less deep and these shoes offer better support and cushioning.

3. Training for cross country races

Mimic your race courses: cross country courses are very different than road race courses. You need to get your body ready for the trails, mud, hills etc. If you are going to tackle Autumn/Winter series of cross country races start to "go cross country" in September. You need to try to replicate what you are going to race over.

Can you find training routes that about the same or more than the distance you are going to race? That has muddy sections, ruts, bends and plenty of short sharp hills? Ensure, if you only run on the roads over the Summer, ease onto the cross country surfaces. You will need to build up strength in your feet, legs, knees and hips slowly to lessen the risk of injury from turning your foot over in a rut or stone (and as at the bottom of this section the importance of scanning the route ahead).

Get your body cross country race fit: cross country races are far less even paced than a typical road race. There is the rush from the start to get a good place, pace changes after hard sections, hard running around bends, slowing down but hard efforts up hills, dropping down slopes and a kick to the finish.

Interval training is the way to go. Splitting your training session into sections of hard and recovery bits. Splitting your hard sections lets you give more effort on each hard section. There's more on interval training within the Wednesday Intervals page that has a link to a Training Matters on this topic.

Also work those hills. Pick some short, sharp hills and practise going hard up them. At the top either stop to recover or more usefully, keep the effort up over the top and beyond. At a hilltop is an excellent place to pass runners as most usually slow down due to the effort expended on the hill itself.

Downhill is also a chance to gain a few places. So, practise on the down slopes as well. There may be a "training matters" on hill training in a future.

Running form: arm use will be more important with the pace changes and hills. Don't be a "tyrannosaurus rex" with arms that don't serve a running purpose. Keep the arms low, forearms parallel to the ground, pump the arm to power the opposite leg and keep the arms moving at right angles to the body. Try to keep the arms from crossing over the body.

Over the muddy areas it's also worth trying to get as much of your shoe sole on the ground as your foot rolls forward for maximum traction, as long as this does not mess with your running form.

Looking ahead: ensure to scan the route ahead to pick up any hazards such as logs, ruts, low branches, pits, slopped muddy ground (easy to slip off this). So, you have a chance to place your foot in a safe place as you are running. Also, it can let you pick the fastest route - the choice between going through the middle of a deep puddle or the long way round? The fastest route maybe between the two.

4. Race tips and comments

The evening before, get all your items ready for race day: clothing, race tops, shoes, bin bags, waterproofs, towel etc. Saves time and worry in the morning and risk of forgetting things.

Have your breakfast well before the race, so your body has time to digest it and lessen stomach cramp risks or the chance of seeing your breakfast again in a different form!

Get to the race venue in good time to get a parking place and work out where to go, all to lessen worry.

Near to the start, go for a good warm up, long enough to really get some good warmth into the legs and arms and test the lungs. A good idea may be to warm up along the start and finish to give an idea of what the race surface is going to be, the best race lines and any problems such as pinch points.

At the start try pick your place between runners around the same speed as yourself. Unless you are one of the top runners being too close to the front will incentivise you to go off too fast and spoil the rest of your race or make you unpopular with other runners needing to pass you. Too far back and you will be obstructed.

Are your shoes tight on (deep, thick mud can pull them off) and your laces tightly tied (very annoying if they come loose mid race). Tuck your laces in to the secure section of the laces or do as the orienteers do and apply tape on the tied lace sections, if the laces keep coming loose.

Try to stay calm, composed, relaxed and loose and be ready for the effort to come.

The race itself could be split into sections:

The start: it's a big rush to get a good position. Try to pick a good race line and not get into too much "oxygen debt" by going off far too fast, that will ruin the rest of your race.

The settle: after the rush of the start let your body calm down and ease into the rest of the race.

The scout: have a look around. What's your nearby opposition? Can you start to pass people? Be very careful on passing runners. It is very easy to go into oxygen debt by running on the rough edges of paths trying to pass people. Pick your point where the path is nice and wide or it may be worth waiting for an uphill section.

Do you need to keep your position and if so, how about getting behind a fellow runner to make the running a little easier. If you are struggling it may be worth a drop back to recover.

The steady: try to maintain an even pace, as far as possible on the terrain, to best use your energy up over the whole race and not fade towards the finish.

The wind up: towards the finish, if you have the energy, it may worth it to up the pace and gain a few places. Don't go too early though and risk using up your energy before the finish and lose those hard-fought places.

The kick: the finish is in sight! Well worth a sprint to the line to use the last of your energy and again gain a few places (but do this without a risk of slipping over or knocking over your fellow runners).

It's over: at the finish, pick up your numbered finish token and catch your breath. Then find the club number collector and give them you finish number. Have a run down to loosen the muscles off and pump away any accumulated lactic acid. Stretches to the main muscles will also do the same. Have a good chat with your fellow runners on how they and you did and look forward to the next race!