

Cross Country Techniques (www.brianmac.demon.co.uk/xcountry.htm)

As the going is softer and often slippery, the stride length must naturally be shorter. If you use the road-running action, with the heel striking the ground well in front of the body, you are likely to skid. Similarly, if your back leg is too far back, you will lose something in the push-off. A shorter stride requires greater leg speed made more difficult by the fact that there is less elastic return. In road and track running energy is stored by compression of ligaments and tendons in the ankle and knee joints. When running on soft surfaces, much of the energy is lost in compressing the ground underneath, so less is stored in the joints. This means that the runner has to bend the legs slightly more at the knees and ankles and use more effort in straightening them. The athlete will have to make a more deliberate effort to pick the thighs up, which requires more work from the muscles that run from the pelvis to the thigh, and this in turn imposes a greater strain on the abdominal muscles, which have to hold the torso rigid while all this effort is going on.

Whereas the efficient road or track runner can glide along relying on bounce and balance to make the work easier, the cross-country runner has to muscle their way along. As the ground beneath their feet is uneven, the runner has to make constant adjustments in balance, using more muscles. Even the angle of the foot will be different. When running on hard surfaces the straight line from heel to toe should be pointing in the direction you are running. On soft surfaces it is necessary to point the toes slightly outwards, so that you slip less. This is less economical than running in a straight line, but the wetter and softer the surface, the more it is necessary.

Pros and Cons of Cross-Country Training

The benefits of cross-country are both mental and physical. The runner who is experienced in cross-country is more robust, more versatile and less likely to be thrown by a sudden change in the weather - an event surprisingly common in major championships in the UK.

The physical benefits derive from the greater demands on the musculature already mentioned above. Greater strength around the hips gives greater leg speed. Perhaps more importantly, training and competing for months in the cross-country season provides tough physical training, working over a wide range of speeds, without the damaging effects of the cumulative jarring that results from track or road training.

Tactical approach

Tactically, front runners stand much more chance of success in cross-country, because the breaks in continuity allow more chance of getting away. You, therefore, have to be committed to a fast pace in the early stages. The 'interference effect' is considerable when the number of competitors is large so if three runners are going for a gap, which will only take two, one of them has to slip back. This means that one person just behind will be pushed back a yard, and this effect goes on down the field, so that 100m can be lost in a mile. Success in cross-country demands a courageous approach, which is why it is recommended as a way of developing distance running talent.