Cross Country as a Leisure Activity

Cross country running can both be a competitive sport and a great leisure-time activity. Running long-distance is an aerobic exercise, a great heart and all-body workout, and it is convenient to do. However, there are some barriers and risks of running that should be noted before running too intensely. Here is a simple guide for new runners on the history, benefits, and risks of long-distance cross-country running.

Cross country running largely originated from a sport called "paper-chasing" in England during the 1800s to condition off-season athletes in the spring and fall, especially rowers. In this game, two runners called "hares" or "foxes" set a trail of shredded paper with a head start, and then younger runners called "hounds" chase the trail and older runners called "huntsmen" followed the hounds and closed in on the hares or foxes when in sight. Another popular sport was the "steeplechase," which involved crossing rugged terrain, including fences and deep water, eventually evolving into the modern steeplechase event on the track. Eventually these sports became international sports, with the first international race occurring between England and France in 1903 and the International Association of Athletes Federations (IAAF) began regulating the sport in 1962. The sport has thus grown into what it currently is: typically five- or ten-kilometer race across uneven terrain. Because of the varying difficulty of different courses, cross-terrain cross-country running (as opposed to 5K and 10K races on the track) do not keep time records.

While the history of the modern sport of cross country as we know it dates back to these relatively modern games, the sport of true cross-country running dates back to the origin of Man. Running long-distance, usually on uneven terrain, is the most basic method of transportation and an easy form of athletic training for physical endurance. Running cross-country for leisure does not have to always be in the form of racing, but instead slow, distance running just to stay in shape or as a means of transportation.

One benefit of cross-country running is the social or spiritual aspect of the sport. Cross-country or running distance can help the runner's wellness, whether he or she is running alone or in a team or group. In a team, there is always support and competition that encourages the runner on, increasing both the runner's athletic ability and social wellness through social interaction. Alone, running distance can be a form of mindfulness, allowing the runner to immerse in him- or herself with running as a passive activity in the background. To many people, slow distance running is relaxing and can be a way to relieve stress.

Physiologically, running is a very physically-intensive sport. Major muscle groups in the core and legs such as the quadriceps (front thighs), hamstrings (back thighs), gluteus (buttocks), hip flexors, abdominal muscles (core), gastrocnemius (calves), tibialis anterior (shin), and peroneal muscles are heavily utilized when running. For an average person, running burns approximately 100 calories per mile — mostly independent of speed — according to the American Council on Exercise (ACE). The ACE estimates that a 120-pound person with an average build uses approximately 11.4 calories per minute, amounting to approximately 100 calories per mile regardless of speed. As a result of running's ability to quickly burn calories, it is a great way to lose weight and keep fit.

While running may be helpful in controlling temporal health issues such as being overweight, it can also improve health in the long run. The health benefits of running on a regular basis, around 150

minutes of moderate aerobic activity such as distance running according to the CDC, can help lower cholesterol and blood pressure, reduce anxiety and depression, and lower the chances of developing diabetes, heart disease, and osteoporosis.

However, running can be dangerous is improperly approached. Running too intensely without adequate training, without stretching,without proper form, with malnutrition, with unhealed injury, or in bad weather conditions can all cause pain and (further) injury to the runner. Runners should always have a balanced diet and stay hydrated, and also maintain enough rest every night. It is encouraged that runners build up their endurance slowly, perhaps beginning with a lower-mileage program that progresses slowly to a higher-mileage program over the span of several months, in order to build up stamina to prevent injury. Injuries from overwork should be treated with resting from running and built up gradually when running is recommenced to prevent another injury; more serious injury such as bone breakage or fractures should be taken care with with full attention to a doctor's note. Running on any type of injury or pain can cause improper form, which makes the runner more prone to further injury. For example, muscle recovery after a marathon can last as long as twelve weeks, and runners are more prone to injury and should focus on less intensive, more recovery-oriented running during this period. Weather is also a factor that should be noted when running: running in rainy, snowy, or icy may be slippery and should be avoided. Running in extremely hot conditions can cause hyperthermia and should be countered with enough water intake, and running in colder conditions can cause hypothermia and should be prevented by wearing enough layers (usually a warm inner layer and a wind-resistant outer layer).

That being said, there are some accidents that cannot be fully prevented. Running on the roadside always has the potential of an accident with a motor vehicle. A runner should make sure to follow all traffic instructions for runners, such as running against the flow of traffic on the left side of the road. To avoid traffic accidents, running in brightly-lit areas and wearing reflectors at night are recommended. A runner should always be highly aware of his or her surroundings, as dangers such as falling trees and uneven terrain — dangers that are inevitable to running outside — can happen at any moment. In dangerous running environments such as very uneven terrain or running very close to cars on the roadside, distractions such as headphones or cellular phones should be avoided.

Sometimes physiological or biological problems such as heart attacks or asthma attacks can happen as well, and therefore runners should be aware of their medical conditions before running. Even well-trained runners can be at risk of these dangers — a 1996 study concluded that 1 out of 50,000 marathon runners have a fatal heart attack during the 24 hours during and after a marathon. Intense running when the runner or the runner's family has a history of joint issues can sometimes cause osteoporosis. Because running can be such a strenuous exercise, one can only minimize these risks by staying fit, keeping good form and nutrition, and not overworking oneself when running.

Running cross-country or distance (or any other form of running) is one of the most primitive forms of exercise and can thus be carried out without any equipment. In short, running cross-country can be *free*, especially for leisure purposes. However, most running should be done with comfortable, well-fitting footwear and clothing. Both the footwear and the clothing should be non-abrasive and breathable, because running involves many repetitive movements that would aggravate abrasion by clothing and generates much heat that should be dissipated through the clothing to avoid hyperthermia.

These are all the basic materials necessary to run, and most people already have this equipment (in the form of sneakers, a t-shirt, and shorts).

Of course, more professional running would involve more equipment, but these are not necessary. Specialized running shoes, whether they be trainer sneakers with increased padding or light, lesser-padded racing shoes can be equipped to benefit a runner's comfort or speed when training or racing. Specialized, breathable and tight-fitting clothing can be worn to increase performance, and body-monitoring devices such heart-rate monitoring devices or GPS smart-watches can be used to help train a person at a specific intensity of training. Additionally, recovery tools such as foam rollers or joint wraps can be bought to increase the rate of recovery and prevent further injury. Lastly, a treadmill can be bought to run indoors in the case of un-runnable weather (such as snow or the previously-mentioned ill-weather conditions), but this too is highly optional equipment. Cost of equipment depends on the level of intensity and can range from $50-100 for a pair of racing or training shoes; to $100-300 for a GPS watch or heart-monitoring device; to $1000-$4000 for the average treadmill. Cost is determined by the runner's needs and can be free.

Running is a sport with a long history that gives the athlete much freedom in their goal and methods. A runner may choose to run competitively or slowly, to lose weight or to simply stay fit, to increase social wellness or self-awareness, and at almost any time with any degree of equipment. It provides many health benefits and many of the health risks are preventable. Running is a great leisure-time activity that is flexible and can fit everyone's needs.

Sources of Information

- http://www.runnersworld.com/running-times-info/the-origins-of-cross-country
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