



BOLANDATHLETICS

THE VALUE OF CROSS COUNTRY RUNNING

Cross country racing develops your body physically and mentally



‘ Cross country running is excellent for developing strength. The terrain forces you to run with your whole body. Your leg strength will improve. Your stomach muscles will get stronger. Your core strength will be enhanced. You’ll be compelled to pump your arms. And increasing your strength—one of the critical five Ss—will help you run faster on the roads or on the track. ’

Often on the roads you see runners who are barely moving their arms at all. They don’t lift their knees very much, either. They don’t develop much strength that way. But at times, cross country can be like running with a weight on your back. You really have to work with your legs. They can feel like they’re about to buckle underneath you! Whereas on the road you can usually just patter along. Your legs might start to feel dead, but they don’t buckle.

Sometimes in cross country, you do a jump or you’re running up a hill, and you’re not sure if you’re going to stumble. Or maybe you’ve picked up a lot of mud on your shoes and they feel as heavy as rocks. Either way, you’re building enormous strength: The hills and mud develop power and resilience in your calves, hamstrings, and quads. The uneven ground strengthens your feet and ankles.

Keeping your balance through all the twists and turns and dips is tremendous for your core strength. The challenging terrain makes you lift your knees, and that works your abdominal muscles and improves your technique, or your skill—another of the five S’s. And the remorseless cycle of stress and recovery as the hills roll by will do wonders for your stamina—yet another of the S’s.

Beyond that, the soft, forgiving, even sticky surfaces, not only increase resistance, making you stronger, they also reduce the jarring effect on your body. When something makes you work harder yet reduces your risk of injury, that’s a good workout.

Because you’re forced to work much harder in cross country, you get more out of breath than you do on the roads. Your heart rate goes up more, too. And that’s a huge benefit. Off-road racing is a very effective way to develop your cardiovascular system, producing a powerful heart, an efficient set of lungs, and a dense network of capillaries to transport oxygen to the muscle fibres.

And it makes you stronger upstairs, too.

Cross country racing is a superb way to develop determination and stickability, pushing back against that final limiting factor—psychology. The mental strength that cross country develops will help you in any kind of race you try.

Just as the physical stresses are tougher in cross country racing, so are the mental stresses. Many is the time you’ll say to yourself, ‘If I can just get up this hill without stopping!’ At this stage you’re not even thinking about whether you can finish the race. Maybe you’ll think about that when you get to the top of the hill. For now, you’re just seeing if you can make it up this one hill without walking. That’s really quite tough—you don’t usually get that feeling in a road race!

But you adapt to psychological stresses just as you do to physical ones—by getting stronger. When you do make it to the top of that awful endless hill, you will have reinforced and improved your toughness. With every success you’ll become more confident. When you experience those feelings where it all hangs in the balance and you’re in danger of losing heart, but in the end overcome that nagging voice urging you to give up, your self-esteem gains a real boost.

The battle’s against yourself and the conditions, not just your rivals: It’s good character-building stuff!

I think runners who do cross country have the sort of strength necessary to cope when the going gets tough on the roads or the track. Because endurance running is largely about how you cope with these feelings. Mental strength is not about being fitter than the other guy; it’s about sticking it out and learning to suffer and dig deeper. When you overcome these hardships, you develop the confidence, the drive, the fierceness, and the aggression to really get the most out of all the physical training you’ve done.

And I think that’s brilliant! The sense of achievement and the satisfaction you get from having strained sinews and limbs to the limit is fantastic.

In all those ways and more, cross country helps you improve, whatever your goals are. Unfortunately, there are people who don’t seem to recognise the enormous value of cross country, and consider it to be a bit of a sideline to ‘real’ athletics.

From The Art of Running Faster by Julian Goater and Don Melvin.

"The five S's of Sports Training are: Stamina, Speed, Strength, Skill, and Spirit; but the greatest of these is Spirit."

Ken Doherty (1905-1996) USA decathlon champion, track and field coach