

Effective Cross Training For Runners

Here, as straightforwardly as we can express them, are the “What, Why and How” of cross training within the context of Marathon Dynamics training plans:

What is it?

Simply put, cross training is any form of secondary aerobic or non-aerobic activity done to assist (either compliment or contrast) your primary activity. That's it. If your primary activity is running, then it could be things like cycling, swimming or inline skating. If your main activity is triathlon, then it could be things like weights, or tennis.



Why do it?

1) Better Aerobic Fitness: XT (cross training), especially “aerobic” XT (ie. gets heart rate up, keeps heart rate up) can build a bigger engine for running. Unless you are Patrick Makau (current marathon world record holder), or a runner of that ilk, then you can actually improve your running fitness and performance through judicious use of supplementary aerobic fitness. Top level elite runners are so fit and so specialized that the best thing they can do to improve their running performance is almost exclusively more/better running...but the rest of us, thank goodness, can improve our running by doing so many other things.

2) Reduced the Risk of Injury: Fewer runs per week = less chance of overuse injuries (while still maintaining or building fitness)...simple as that. The bone/ligament/muscle specificity, and concomitant impact trauma of the largely repetitive activity of running creates a significant potential risk of injury. So, by diversifying the muscles you use, and/or the way you use your running muscles, you markedly reduce the chance of over use injury.

3) Maintain Fitness When Injured: In the instance (some may say eventuality) that you do get hurt running—a proficiency with another “running similar” activity, will allow you to maintain (though perhaps not build upon) whatever level of speed/fitness/performance you had attained prior to the injury. The key is to develop the interest and ability with the x-training activity BEFORE GETTING INJURED, not waiting until an injury happens to start exploring the world of XT. The associated drop in spirit and motivation that can be brought on by an injury can make the “getting inspired to learn and do a whole new activity” thing too much to handle, and usually skaters will not be able to make the jump in that situation. Whereas if one already has other activities available, it simply means switching over from 1 or 2 times/wk to 3 or 4 times/wk...rather than 0 to 3 or 4 work-outs of an activity you are not familiar with, and have not made the necessary investment (time, money, learning) to know how to do it, etc.

4) Mental & Physical Variety: “Variety is the spice of life...and of exercise.” Show me someone who runs 6 or 7 days per week, and I'll show you a bored (and at the risk of being presumptuous, probably “boring”) runner. By spicing up your exercise regimen, you not only look forward to the different activities you've now woven into your weekly schedule, you get more excited about the 2, 3 or 4 runs you have per week...cause you only get to do them every couple of days (the scarcity effect).

5) Total Body Fitness: Despite the benefit running can produce in our cardiovascular fitness, and in certain aspects of our musculature (i.e. legs, hips, back), there are certain aspects of our body as a whole that it doesn't develop as well (i.e. upper body, trunk or “core”). So, the only way to reap the full reward of the effort you put forth in your running (and not have friends and family eventually begin commenting on how “sick, drawn and undernourished you look) is to compliment it with a supporting cast of activities that develop the muscles that running doesn't, and provide different types of stresses for the muscles that running does.



How do it?

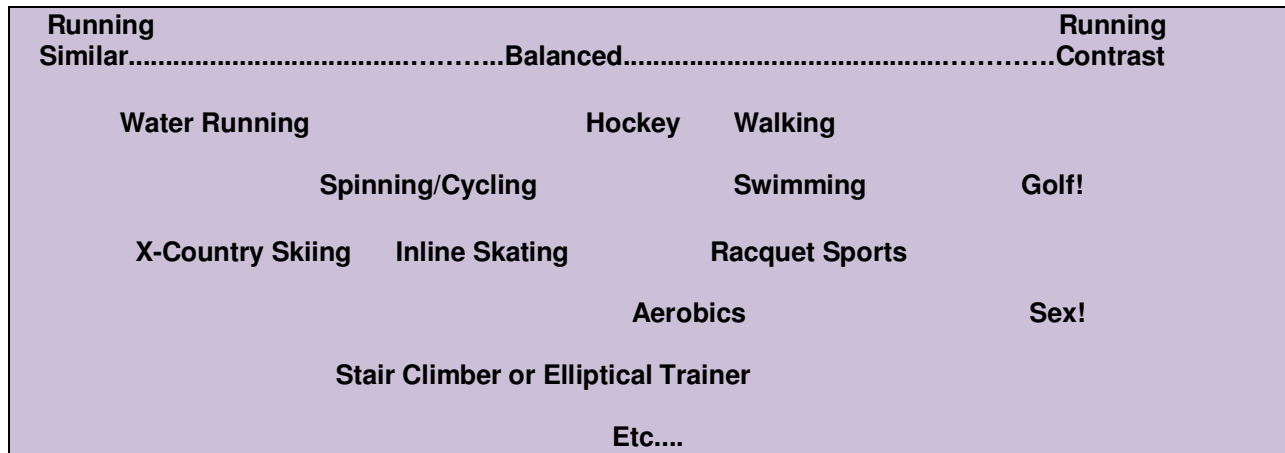
Think of there being a spectrum that differentiates XT options, to the degree that the activities are either similar to running, or contrasting with running, based upon two criteria:

- 1) **aerobic conditioning element** 2) **muscle specificity element**
- Running Similar**.....**VS**.....**Running Contrast**

In doing so we end up with 3 categories that most XT activities will fall into:

- 1) **Running Similar (no matter how hard you do them, they mimic running)**
- 2) **Balanced (if done hard--80%+ of MHR or Max perceived effort—running similar, if done easy—70% or less of MHR or Max effort, they are running contrast)**
- 3) **Running Contrast (no matter how hard you do them, they contrast with running)**

As such, the spectrum would look something like this (along with various x-training activities plotted to give you an idea where they fall on the spectrum)



Finally, we need to decide how to choose the days to do particular activities, based on our life vs. running schedule, our experience/fitness level and our condition (i.e. injured or healthy). Using the following key, here is how we suggest breaking it down:

Key: R = run work-out XS = x-train run similar XC = x-train run contrast 0 = rest day

State of Runner	Mo	Tu	We	Th	Fr	Sa	Su
Experienced Runner - healthy	R	XSorXC	R	RorXS	0	R	RorXSorXC
Experienced Runner - injured	XS	0orXC	XS	XSorXC	0	XS	XC
New/Novice Runner - healthy	R	XC	R	XC	0	R	XC
New/Novice Runner - injured	XS	0	XS	XC	0	XS	0orXC