

The Running Life: Cross Training

Winter Running with a Cranky Yankee

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Sure I'm cross. I'm angry. I'm peeved. I'm simply not happy. The New England winter is upon us and sooner or later it's going to be too icy or too dark or too darned cold to head out the door and go for a run. Don't get me wrong; normally I love the winter wonderland that is my small Maine town. There is nothing more satisfying or meditatively fulfilling than running while the snow falls around you. The undisturbed blanket of white muffles your footfalls. Cars whir quietly by. Streets are practically deserted as only the most dedicated runners and walkers find their way outside. There are other days that dawn frigid and crystalline. The air is still and dry. Getting started can be a chore. Soon, however, body temperature rises and running seems effortless and invigorating. These are the times that define the beauty of winter running.

Then there is the flip side, the reason why the occasional northerner throws in the towel (or, in this case, the snow shovel) and moves to Florida. To paraphrase the old maxim: Want to make Mother Nature laugh? Plan a winter training schedule. She doesn't care if you're trying to get in shape for Boston. Freezing rain can be what greets you on the day you absolutely, positively have to get a long run onto your log. Need to get on the track for some speed work? See if you can find it after a blizzard dumps a few feet of powder on the lanes. And just try to work in your daily run in the miserly five and a half hours of December daylight. Winter running in northern climes presents challenges for even the most intrepid athlete.

Necessity being the mother of invention, I have been forced to incorporate creative running workouts for the worst winter weather into my training. Notice I said "running workouts." Although I'm as fond of swimming and biking as the next guy, I am a runner who values specificity. I know that nothing prepares me for running except running. These workouts don't necessarily come with a guarantee for a rockin' good time, but they will serve you well in even the most inclement conditions. With luck, you'll not only enjoy these running alternatives, you might find that, come spring, you'll be fitter, faster, and ready to take on the racing season.

Pool Running. Hey, if it's good enough for Olympians and Smarty Jones, it's probably good enough for us. Whether you use a flotation vest and run in deep water or stay at the shallow end for your workout, pool running can be a valuable weapon in your winter running arsenal. Using a heart rate monitor will help you get the most out of your pool workout. Try doing intervals—10x3 minutes at an 85 percent effort with a 30 second recovery—concentrating on form as you run. Short, intense workouts seem to serve water running best. The pool is probably not the place to replicate a long run. You might perish from boredom or terminal skin pucker before you finish. Here's a pool-running tip I learned from a triathlete friend—wear an old pair of running shoes during your workout. The shoes will add resistance and give you a little more "push" as you run.

Treadmill Workouts. In February of 2000 Christine Clark, a little-known doctor and mother of two from Alaska, graphically illustrated the benefits of riding (or running) out the winter months on a treadmill, by winning the Olympic Marathon Trials in 2:33:31. Clark's win pointed out another benefit of treadmill training. Since the bulk of her running was done indoors where the ambient temperature was above 70 degrees, Clark was more prepared for the blistering temperatures that greeted her on race day in South Carolina. Treadmill running is a great way to do speed work, because the machine doesn't lie and demands that you stay on pace. It's an effective tool for a long run, again keeping you on goal pace and allowing you the distractions of TV, music or even conversation. Group runs at the gym on adjoining machines allow for speed play and help pass the time as well. Try a modified Indian run drill. With at least four people lined up and running at the same pace, one at a time, each person in turn ups his or her pace for two minutes, then falls back on pace with the rest of the group as the next runner speeds up.

Snowshoe Running. This is a workout, my friends, which can bring you to your knees. Growing in popularity every year, snowshoe running is said to be a potential demonstration sport in the 2010 Winter Olympics. Devotees of the sport say that every half hour of snowshoe running is comparable to an hour of running the roads. They're right. Heck, they're probably being conservative. Everything you can accomplish on the roads you can do in the snow: speed work, hills, and intervals. It's just significantly more taxing, at least at first. The benefit of snowshoe running, beyond the obvious, is the ability to get an amazing workout in almost any winter conditions.

The addition of alternative running options has undoubtedly made me a happier, healthier winter runner. These activities have not only helped me remain running fit through the most brutal winters; pool and treadmill running have served me well both when I travel and when I visit my family in Florida during the oppressively hot summer months.

This winter there will be no more "cross" training, no more bad attitudes. My new winter mantra? Let it snow, let it snow, let it snow!.

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