

OLYMPIC

SECRETS FOR TRAIL RUNNERS

With Liz &
Martin Yelling

With the build-up to the 2012 Olympics well underway, we asked double Olympian Liz Yelling and her husband and coach Martin Yelling to explain how we can all get more from an Olympic approach to off-road running

Words: Martin Yelling Photos: Bob Atkins

When you think of an Olympic marathon runner you probably think of someone who spends hours and hours pounding out the miles on tarmac. After all, a major city marathon or a championship marathon is a very long run on the road.

One of the most important things an elite marathon runner needs in their armoury is a strong aerobic foundation. A robust and solid base onto which they can layer the rest of their training is an absolute fundamental.

As a two time Olympian and Commonwealth medallist in the marathon, Liz Yelling knows a little about what it takes to run fast on the roads. But it's off-road and on the trails and country tracks that she first began her marathon career and it's that same surface that stills hold some of the secrets to her marathon success now.

GETTING STARTED

With a top 15 finish in the 2008 World Cross Country championships, off-road running is key to Liz's training. She says: "I started running cross country as a kid and got my first real taste of success not running on the track or roads but running off-road in cross country. I've since been to 10 World Cross Country Championships and come away with team Bronze medals in two of them. Cross country really is my first love in running but I also use it to great effect in my build up to a road marathon".

For an elite marathon runner the focus is on covering 26.2 miles as fast as possible. In training this means that becoming efficient and economical for a relatively long time is really important. The best male marathon runners in the world run at sub

WHY TRAIL RUNNING IS GOOD FOR YOU

There's no better training for off-road running than actually getting out there and doing it but it offers much more:

- **Reduced risk of injury from repetitive stress.**
- It's like a great day out. You get the sights, sounds and smells that being on-road simply doesn't offer. Running becomes a real pleasure.
- **Allows clear air and a clear head.**
- Gives you a break from pavement pounding.
- **Breaking away from your usual environment and going somewhere different can be refreshing both mentally and physically.**
- It's safer than running on roads.
- **You get a different training benefit from going off road.**
- It helps you become a strong, robust and all-round healthy runner, boosting your aerobic fitness but also your general conditioning.



OLYMPIC

SECRETS FOR

TRAIL RUNNERS

five-minute miling for the full marathon. That's shifting!

Elite marathon runners have to train their bodies to be able to tolerate high mileage and fast speeds as they really push the boundaries of comfort. They'll do this through long runs, threshold runs, intervals and hill training but for many marathoners not all of this training needs to be done, or indeed is advisable to be done, on the roads.

Bagging some miles on trails and off roads is a vital part of their training regime. It provides a much needed break from the pounding of the pavements, is less focused on the intense demands of the stopwatch and time-based outcomes, gives a little escapism from the hum drum of road miles, provides brilliant training variation and is exciting, challenging and motivating.

ON THE TRAIL OF THE GAMES

Before competing in the Athens and Beijing Olympics, Liz used trail running in her build up. She says: "When I'm preparing for a marathon the first phase of my training involves me →



The shadowy figure wore the world's brightest head torch

HILL TRAINING

Elite marathon runners build hill repeats into their training. Running hills develops strong, powerful legs, a strong heart and lungs, and great mental tenacity. "My hill sessions are hard," says Liz. "I include hills of varying gradients and lengths. I'll run sets of eight to 10 hard hill efforts lasting between 30 seconds and two minutes with a jog down recovery."

One of the best things about running off-road is the variety of terrain you can build into a run. This variety creates a natural training environment. There's no need to artificially try to create varied intensity workouts. Running off-road on rolling terrain you've got everything you want for a natural performance-boosting training ground.

As the trail climbs up you have to shorten your stride, push up onto the balls of your feet, drive your knees and arms and lean into the hill to generate maximum forward and upward momentum. As you crest the climb and descend the other side relax, focus on maintaining your balance by using your arms, and let gravity and your legs carry you down.



Liz Yelling used all her off-road skills to compete in two Olympic Games



OLYMPIC SECRETS FOR TRAIL RUNNERS



spending lots of time steady running. These are base miles with time on my feet. I think I'd get quite bored and lose my mojo pretty quickly if I just did the same road routes.

"Being off-road means I get to see a whole lot more and the unstructured nature of trail running means it's great for boosting my fitness too.

"I start my marathon training phase around 16 weeks before a major race and the bulk of my running at this time is off-road on tracks, trails and paths. As my plan progresses I shift to including more specific on-road preparation but I always maintain some off-road running in my weekly training regime.

"One of my personal favourite

off-road training sessions is a 'landmark fartlek'. I choose an undulating hilly trail circuit to run on for 30 to 40mins and pick natural landmarks, such as trees, tops of hills, rock formations, dips and rises in the land that are different distances away to run to. I then choose a different pace from easy, steady, fast or very fast to run to these landmarks. This type of continuous mixed paced running gives me a cracking aerobic workout and I find it easy to stay motivated and run hard when I've got so many interesting things around me to focus on."

Running off-road strikes at the heart of boosting base endurance, strength and aerobic fitness. The change in

surface, the undulation of the terrain, the stop-start of gates and stiles, the grind of exposed high points and the rush of rocky descents means your body gets a total workout.

TOTAL WORKOUT

The uneven footing helps with ankle proprioception, stability and control and the turning, climbing and descending means your core and trunk get more of a workout than with the constant one plane movements required for road running.

The great thing about trail running is that it's so accessible for everyone regardless of ability. You don't have to be super fit to get off road. Every runner can tap into its benefits. **TR**

TRAIN LIKE AN OLYMPIAN

In a build up to a major marathon race, Liz includes both running on and off-road and her key workouts are intervals, hills, threshold runs and long runs. Olympic marathon runners typically run high miles each week (80 to 120miles) and often training sessions are done twice a day. In a 16-week build up more of this running is done off-road in the first six weeks than the final 10 weeks when the emphasis shifts to greater road running and specific marathon focused pace and stamina workouts.

OLYMPIC TRAINING SECRETS TO HELP YOU PERFORM

- **Ringfence your run time.** You won't get the best out of your running without protecting your time to train. Prioritise that time and stick to it and when you do get out for that run, mean it. Run with purpose, passion and intent.
- **Rest! It shouldn't be all hard work.** As a rule of thumb for every hard day's training take two easy. Remember that getting off-road is easier on the muscles, joints and bones and so helps reduce the risk of injury.
- **Plan your training:** Know what you are going to do and when. Your plan should be progressive, structured and focused. Don't be a slave to it though. Your training plan should be flexible to fit to your life.
- **Variation is the spice of better performances!** Doing the same type of running can make your running routine boring and stagnant. Mix it up by including fartleks, hill training and intervals to spice up your running.
- **Ease the pressure – beat the stress.** It can be a great stress reliever not to clock watch. Once in a while just get out and run for as long as you fancy at whatever pace you like.
- **Run with others.** Find a training partner, a running buddy, a group or club. Running with others keeps you motivated, focused and actually makes you train harder!
- **Be headstrong.** At times in your training it's going to feel tough. You have to teach your body to be strong and continue running when it hurts. When you feel like you want to stop you'll have the ability to hang in there and keep going.

"The great thing about trail running is that it's so accessible for everyone regardless of ability"

GET READY AND RECOVER

Any running training session should begin with gentle cardiovascular exercise (light walking/running) to raise your body temperature, get the blood flow moving, warm the muscles, tendons and ligaments, and get the heart and lungs working. Conclude your warm up with some stretching and mobilization exercises to help get you ready.

Don't come to an abrupt stop after your run either. Gradually slow it down to a walk and give your body time to calm down with a gentle cool down. After your run stretch out muscles and include a series of static, held stretches.

