

The New York Times

Well

Tara Parker-Pope on Health

JUNE 11, 2009, 1:47 PM

The Benefits of Cross Training

By LIZ ROBBINS

T.C. Worley for The New York Times Cycling is a good way for runners to build fitness on the days they don't run. Liz Robbins

I felt a little wistful the other day when, riding my road bike, I passed runners gliding by on the upper bridle path in Central Park. That used to be me, before the pain in my knees and hip made other workout plans. So I shifted gears, pedaled faster and contemplated the benefits of cross-training.

A Race Like No Other

Liz Robbins explores the people and culture of the marathon.

Back in the 1970s, during the first running boom, runners obsessively piled on the mileage in their Nike waffle trainers. Today, with recreational runners training for first marathons and ever-older runners eager to stay active, people are trying to maximize their body's potential without running it into the ground.

Your Marathon

Coaching, tips and inspiration to get you race-ready.

Sign up for a Run Well Training Plan

Meet the Coaches

Kara Goucher on First Marathons

Find Your Fall Marathon

"If you want to do a marathon, you really only need to do three runs a week," said Neil Cook, the multi-sport program manager at Asphalt Green, a city-owned sports complex in Manhattan. The other two days, Mr. Cook said, should be spent on cross-training activities like cycling or swimming.

Of course, he warns, those three days of running must be intense and concentrated workouts: speed, hills and a long run.

Cycling is the best cross-training sport for runners, Mr. Cook believes, since it builds an aerobic base while maintaining range of motion. "It forces your leg muscles to contract and increases the blood flow," he said. "If you do it properly, you're not really straining on the bike, the muscles aren't getting that abused."

Cyclists tend to work opposing muscles — like the quadriceps and hamstrings — differently than they do when on foot. Indeed, recreational athletes who only run can end up with muscular imbalances, according to Bill Pierce, the director of the Furman

Institute of Running and Scientific Training in Greenville, S.C.

He and his colleagues wrote “Runner’s World Run Less, Run Faster” (Rodale, 2007), which promotes a training program of three days of running (track repeats, tempo and long runs), plus two days of cross-training workouts.

Cliplless pedals that are adjusted to the length of the legs can help cyclists concentrate on a fluid cadence — which Mr. Pierce considers the most important feature of the cycling workout for runners.

The average runner’s cadence is 180 steps per minute. “If you get on the bike and you’re riding at 90 r.p.m.’s,” you replicate that cadence, Mr. Pierce said.

Runners still want to know the secret formula: the exact number of cycling miles (riding outdoors or spinning indoors) that correspond to running miles.

There is no formula. “Just folklore,” Mr. Cook said.

Time is the essence, coaches agree. Equal the time of how long you would normally run on a recovery day — say 45 minutes — in order to turn these so-called “junk miles” into a productive workout.

As for other alternatives to running, many trainers and coaches recommend strength training or pilates, either after a run or on a cross-training day. Swimming, as triathletes can attest, provides cardiovascular benefits without impact. Runners could use a kickboard to improve ankle flexibility while swimming laps, Mr. Pierce suggested.

Friends of mine with foot and knee injuries swear by deep-water running to maintain fitness. I call pool running the poor-man’s solution to the underwater treadmill that Olympians like Deena Kastor have used while rehabilitating their own injuries. These professionals are privy to other luxury devices like the Alter-G antigravity treadmill, which the three-time New York City Marathon winner Paule Radcliffe trained on and which U.S. Olympic marathoner Dathan Ritzenhein told me he used last spring in his basement while he rehabilitated from a foot injury.

Meanwhile, back on Planet Regular Runner, we each have our own methods for staying in shape while nursing or minimizing injuries. Give me the bike.

“Nothing will replace running — sport specificity is important for training for a marathon,” said Michael Conlon, a local trainer and coach of the Team in Training triathlon team in Brooklyn. “There are those of us who can’t, however, get away with running five days a week.”

That’s why the New York Road Runners’ editorial director Gordon Bakoulis, a former elite runner who coaches the Running Divas New York team, urges people to start cross-training before injury or age forces them into it.

“The goal is not so much to improve your performance,” she said, “the goal is to stay injury free, which will, eventually, improve your performance.”

Copyright 2009 The New York Times Company | Privacy Policy | NYTimes.com 620 Eighth Avenue New York, NY 10018