

Cross Training

Sarah Coope

The success of triathlon, duathlon, masters swimming and indoor rowing has been largely from athletes crossing over from different sports.

These athletes have found that rather than inhibit performance in their primary sport, training in others has enhanced it. Many successful runners use biking, water running, or swimming in their weekly training schedule.

What is cross training?

Cross training is exercising in several sports or activities to achieve a training goal.

Other sports and activities such as hill walking, cycling, swimming, canoeing, rowing, weight training, circuits and aerobics add variety and help increase the amount of exercise that can be done, while minimising the amount of stress on an athlete's body.

How will it help my running?

Reduce injury

When we exercise we place stress on our muscles, which causes them to break down and, during rest, repair to be stronger. If running is our only exercise, the same muscles are always stressed. This increases the likelihood of pushing it too hard and picking up an injury. By exercising with other activities, the stress on the muscles used in running is reduced as is the likelihood of injury.

Flexibility training such as Pilates, Yoga or a good stretching routine also reduces the chances of injury, as you develop a wider range of motion.

Balanced fitness

By combining a variety of activities, different muscles are used and a more balanced overall fitness can be achieved - for example instead of doing a gentle running session after a intense speed work out, half an hour swimming will give an aerobic workout, reduce stress on legs and improve torso and upper body conditioning.

Strengthening areas other than legs can improve your running performance. For example, a strong upper body will carry over to a more powerful running action. Improving core (torso) strength with activities such as circuits and aerobic classes will help to improve stability.

Add variety

Training with more than one sport not only reduces stress and gives more rounded fitness but is great for motivation. Because of the variety of activities, there is less of a routine to training which alleviates boredom, so increasing motivation.

In addition, when training for longer distance events, adding variety to training by incorporating less stressful activities such as cycling, can increase the likelihood of completing long aerobic sessions that are a necessary part of the training programme.

How should I choose my additional activities?

It is important to choose a sport that complements your running training. A priority is to give the legs and body less strenuous wear and tear. Sports such as swimming, rowing and biking all give good cardiovascular benefits without having to be highly competitive or overly strenuous.

Some sports pose a high risk of injury such as contact sports like soccer and rugby, sports which involve a lot of twisting and turning such as squash and extreme sports. Such sports should not necessarily be totally avoided, but you should be aware that if an injury occurs while participating in them, it could set back any progress you are making with your running training.

Cross training and injury

While some injuries require a total break from any exercise, others require total rest from running only - particularly high intensity, strenuous running.

At this time it is useful to find an alternative activity which, so long as it does not aggravate the injury, you can substitute for running workouts - an ideal time to start cross training.

For instance, if rowing does not bother the injury, it is possible to maintain a very high level of cardiovascular fitness through using a rowing machine at a gym. Other activities such as biking or swimming may be equally good substitutes.

When substituting an activity for running it is best to substitute time rather than distance.

For example if it is impossible to do speed-work on the injury then transfer the workout to another activity. For instance if the workout intended was 10 x 400m sprints, then do 10 hard rows for the time it would take you to do a 400m sprint. Recovery time would be the same as it would be for the running session. A similar approach could be taken to a swimming session. This way you will maintain fitness while allowing time for the injury to recover.

Here's an example of a weekly rowing training programme that you could follow if laid off from running:

Day 1

Steady row for 30 minutes followed by 10 minutes alternative activity (e.g. cross country ski machine) at steady pace

Day 2

Row 1 hour, alternating pace for variation.

Day 3

Warm up with 10 minutes relaxed (or 'easy') rowing. Then 6 x 500m hard effort (should take 1 to 2 minutes). Recover by easy rowing for the same time as hard rowing. Cool down with 10 minutes easy rowing.

Day 4

Day off

Day 5

Warm up with 10 minutes easy rowing. Then 2 x 10 minutes hard effort. Recover with 5 minutes easy rowing between. Cool down with 5 - 10 minutes easy rowing.

Day 6

Swim, Yoga, Pilates or another similar low impact activity.

Day 7

Steady row for 1 hour, include 10 x 250m (up to a minute) hard rowing during it. Recover with one minute easy rowing between the hard rowing.

Introducing cross training to a running training plan

If incorporating an alternative activity it's best to substitute the relaxed recovery runs that take place after a hard session, and carry on with the speed-work and long steady runs.

For example substitute a 30 min recovery run with cycling or another activity carried out at the same intensity as you would have done the recovery run.

Swimming is an exception to this however as it exercises the legs a lot less, so it is possible to work quite hard in the pool and still enable the legs to recover.