TALKING Trail *by Keith MacIntosh, club secretary and coach*

Even if you're ultimately preparing for a race on the roads, there's a huge amount to be said for including a significant chunk of trail running within your training mix. It can bring variety, form improvement, pleasure, and a better understanding of how your body works. Your balance, agility, core stability and power can all be developed as you move over mixed terrain and a range of surfaces.



Elite runners *on the Kenyan trails*

The vast majority of training for elite Kenyan distance runners takes place on red dirt trails above the Rift Valley, and it seems to work fairly well for them. They can get through a massive training volume with relatively few injuries, because they're working (at altitude) on rolling ground with a little bit of give underfoot. And that means their cardio fitness can be developed without the corresponding impact that would come from doing the same on tarmac.

And for most of us, too, trail running probably already makes up a significant proportion of what we do — 3-mile Handicap, Sunday Social, Wimbledon parkrun, the towpath, Richmond Park. All of those are definitely included. We're very lucky to have some wonderful running country right on our doorstep – and that's without thinking about MABACs and other options in deepest, darkest Surrey.

So, hopefully, none of this is new news, and trail running may already be a big reason for you being a Windmiler.

If you're slightly uncomfortable on rough ground, then pay attention and slow it down. That's one of the differences and challenges, and reasons why it's satisfying – you need to think your way around, and be mindful of what you're running over. If it's muddy, or hilly, or you've got to climb over a stile or check your directions, then you'll naturally be slower – and that's a more intelligent way to do it than letting your splits dictate something stupid. If it's more efficient to walk up a hill then walk – there's no extra cake for running every step.

Like everything else, if you don't practise it, then you'll never become more comfortable with it. So, occasionally, it's worth actively seeking out the narrower trails with the tree roots, or the loose gravel hill, and treating that as a technical drill. You'll build your fitness at the same time, and it'll still give you a solid cardio workout. But you'll be working on other things, too.

Trail running doesn't have to be super-long or hilly – although it can be both of those things. It spans everything from a race I did in the Alps in June (La Verticale du Criou – a mere 2.8k long, but with 1,450m of ascent) all the way through to 150 mile virtually-flat canal races (© P Chandler). The point is, it's off tarmac.

I did a very quick and unscientific survey of a few people within the club who regularly hit the trails. Some themes:



- Enjoying getting lost, finding new corners, a sense of discovery.
- Child-like pleasure in getting muddy and dirty, and occasionally falling over when mucking about in the woods.
- Getting a real connection to the place where you are running – nature, landscape, geology – through sound and smell as well as sight.
- Escaping the daily grind of traffic, noise, technology.
- Working hard – or not – based on perceived effort and your own preference, rather than agonising over your splits or distance.
- Unlocking big training benefits in a more enjoyable way than just ticking off numbers on the roads

So, if any of that appeals more than (or alongside) mindless tarmac-bashing, then there are some fantastic trail options right here on our doorstop. If you want suggestions (or ideas on trail training, kit, or technique), then please just ask.

HOW TO DO IT

- **Land on your forefoot to enable the ankle to absorb unevenness**
- **Quick, precise ground contact, and a faster cadence than on the road**
- **Don't be a slave to your watch – be smart and allow the terrain to set the pace**
- **Use your arms for balance, and for power on the hills**
- **Look ahead, anticipate what's coming and adjust your stride and angle of approach**



Looking up *Still a long way to go at La Verticale du Criou*

TRAINING BENEFITS

- **Develop cardio fitness while avoiding impact injuries**
- **Transition towards mid- or forefoot landing**
- **Increased balance, agility, and proprioception**
- **Improved running form – running tall, with strong arm drive**
- **Better understanding of effort levels**
- **And, if it's more enjoyable, then you'll be motivated to do more of it. So it's possible you'll end up doing more overall volume, too**