

Happy Trails

When I relocated to Southern Oregon from Portland a few years ago, I was happy to find that the Rogue valley is rich with places to run on the road and trail. Local runs/races on trails include the Mt. Ashland Hill Climb, Siskiyou Outback, Granite Man. Popular trails include those above Britt, Lithia Park to Mt. Ashland, portions of the PCT and the Bear Creek Greenway. As a physical therapist who personally enjoys exploring this rich network, I am interested in what runners should keep in mind as they hop off of the pavement and onto the trail.

Trails can be composed of just about anything with different degrees of firmness from cement to sand. Different surfaces place different demands on our bodies (muscles, joints, bones). Footwear appropriate for the type of surface as well as the biomechanics of the runner is always important. Trail running shoes normally have “grippier” soles and slightly more flexibility than road running shoes to allow for varied terrain. If you are unsure of the type of shoe you should wear for the surfaces, distances and goals you are after, local running stores (Rogue Valley Runners) and/or your physical therapist can guide you.

Many trails involve climbing and descending. Climbing requires flexible ankles, strong gluteals and concentric (shortening) quad and posterior calf strength. Descending requires greater eccentric (lengthening) quad, HS and glut contraction to stabilize the knee and minimize impact on the knee joint with each step.

Just like on the road, running form is crucial. Common running errors include leaning back on downhills and forward on uphill and running with a flat/heel landing instead of using a forefoot/midfoot strike. As the miles add up, strengths and weaknesses emerge. All runners (road or trail) can benefit from strengthening and/or stretching routines designed for their unique anatomies. “What is tight should be stretched, what is weak should be strengthened.”

Major muscle groups include: core (lower abdominals, pelvic floor, back extensors), gluteals (hip abductors, rotators and extensors), quads, hamstrings, lower leg/ankle strengthening, balance and proprioception (joint sense). Including some plyometric training will help train fast-twitch muscle fibers to react to the rapid changes in movement that trail running demands. Runners should do distances and terrain based on specific goals and progress these appropriately. New trail runners should consider running the uphill and walking the downhill to reduce compression forces on knee joints. Talking to other runners in the area about trail specifics and running with a buddy are also good ideas.

Happy trails to you!

Jackson County Physical Therapy offers video running analysis at each of their locations. Mineca Riggs DPT is a recreational trail runner and cyclist. She is a physical therapist at the Medford location of JCPT. She can be reached at 541-776-2333.

