

Conditioning Preparation for Your First Adventure Race

The sport of Adventure Racing is increasing in popularity at a phenomenal rate. The challenges presented to adventure racers have drawn interest from elite athletes, lovers of outdoor activity and also from big business attracted by the elements of the sport and the parallels with life and work. Adventure Racing is one of the rare sports where just completing a race for many participants is as important as victory. A driving factor in Adventure racing is the focus that is placed on teamwork, rather than individual achievement.

A non-stop, multi-sport, mixed team event, the competitive goal is to be the first team to get all members across the finish line together. Early adventure racing was the domain of the extreme, but recent times have seen the sport come closer to the mainstream with shorter races requiring less resources, training time and technical skill. In reality, most races are less than a day long with some only a few hours.

Adventure racing can be an intimidating undertaking for a first time competitor. There are many things to learn and prepare for. Planning, acquiring new skills, thoughts about food, technical clothing, who to race with to name but a few but invariably it is the level of fitness or conditioning required that plays most on the mind of a participant.

Like all sports training, conditioning for an adventure race can be organized into two broad elements, general and specific preparation. The first element of conditioning preparation is to establish a sound level of basic 'general physical fitness'. The objective of this type of training is to raise overall working capacity regardless of the specific elements needed for your race. This basically means you need to increase your 'fitness' in all of the major physical abilities (e.g cardiovascular endurance, muscular endurance, strength, power, flexibility, agility). The second element of your training involves specific preparation. Sports science has demonstrated for many years that the body's adaptation to training is specific to the training you perform, in practical terms this means you need to focus your training on the specific physiological demands of your race. In short, the first task in your preparation is to increase overall fitness - you can of course begin to work on the disciplines involved in your event - you then zero in on the specific characteristics/dynamics of your race.

Planning Your Training

Step 1 is to face the truth and establish what your own starting point is right now.

(Quick tip, it really, really makes sense to get assistance from a conditioning specialist at this point even if you split the cost between team members. If you don't you might regret it later)

Look at your injury status, including current problems and past history, look at your exercise/training experience, look at current fitness ability, look at the kind of resources you are going to have to mobilize, look at the time you have to prepare. Once you are clear about your own start point, next you analyse the race itself. This means performing a **detailed analysis** of the characteristics of the race. I mean detailed! Let me give you an example, I recently helped prepare a team for a challenge that included several kilometers of uphill cycling. Simple enough it seemed however at closer examination we realised it would take place in over 30° of heat and at an altitude of 2-3000 metres (a very different challenge) so remember it's all in the details.

Having considered yourself and the race you are now ready to establish clear training objectives and put together a plan. Too often people follow some generic programme from a sport

magazine or a friend who has done a 10k or something, not good. ***Your training preparation must be about you and your plan designed based on you.*** If this is your first race, I recommend at least 6 months preparation.

Before I talk about training, understand the importance of recovery and nutrition during your preparation. You can quickly sabotage all your training efforts if you don't address these two issues. If you are going to train hard you need to recover just as hard.

(Quick tip, be amazed at the value and effectiveness of consistently getting a good night's sleep!)

Months 1-3 – General Physical Preparation

Much of the fitness experience of many first time racers is likely to be based on exercise performed in an indoor or health club environment. Although specific content will be based on your individual analysis the major focus here is all round cardio-vascular development and the use of a whole body resistance training approach to develop what is sometimes referred to as anatomical adaptation. A range of options are open to you here, the key is regular training that is steadily progressive. You should be looking to build from on a minimum 3 x p/week schedule possibly moving to 4 or 5 sessions over time, also consider splitting your cardio and resistance sessions in month 3. Sixty minutes of continuous (not just slow paced steady work) CV activity by the latter stages is an excellent target. If you like group based exercise, spinning and metabolic circuits are good options.

(Quick tip, be amazed at the simplicity and effectiveness of a good run or cycle and some bodyweight resistance exercises with a team mate!)

Months 4-6 – Specific Physical Preparation

Those new to the sport are not likely to have encountered several hours of continuous walking, jogging or cycling, particularly on uneven surfaces or undulating terrain. Although useful as an early foundation, basic conditioning or general training will not be enough to prepare you for the demands and challenges of outdoor racing. Many other characteristics must be included in second phase of training, including anaerobic training, dynamic balance work, and whole body stability demonstrated in unpredictable ways. Individuals with a background in multi directional sports such as soccer, rugby, hockey etc. can have a physical advantage to begin with as these sports provide more complete conditioning in this way.

(Quick tip, training programs focusing on steady state cardiovascular exercise and machine based resistance training bare no resemblance to the challenges facing the adventure racer).

Cardio-vascular training should now shift to outdoors and move toward a more fartlek style approach. You must condition your body as best you can to tolerate higher levels of lactate and acidity. Hill training using an interval approach is also great conditioning for this.

As most of the racers I work with are in full time employment and based in cities, I recommend gym based training during the week and outdoor sessions on the weekend. It is during the outdoor sessions that you can begin developing the experience of extended hours of major elements of your race (e.g. hiking). You should also perform as much of this training using the kind of terrain that you will encounter in your event. This is also a great opportunity to combine your conditioning with team building and skill development sessions if technical

elements are important. *(For the teams I work with I usually insist I take them through at least one outdoor training day as part of their preparation).*

(Quick tip(s), remember you may have to think or do something high skill when fatigued so try it in practice first, it's also useful to find out how team mates react under pressure and fatigue before the race begins)

During this phase, I suggest if appropriate you move emphasis in your whole body resistance training programme toward utilizing “structural exercises”. Exercises such as deadlifts, squats, lunges, overhead pressing, rowing and carrying exercises are excellent. There are many variations of these movements, select those best suited to you, your fitness level and your event.

Although I strongly advocate working with a conditioning specialist throughout I realize this is not feasible for all. Although this article does not offer specific training protocols, it offers you some insight to help with your first time conditioning preparation. I hope that you reach your event in the best condition of your life, ready to enjoy the experience of your first adventure race.

Good luck and good racing!

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