

Conditioning Preparation for Adventure Racing

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.

Adventure racing can be described as a non-stop, multi-sport, mixed team event, although some shorter races now allow individual entries. The goal of the competition is to be the first team to get all members across the finish line together. Disciplines commonly included are hiking, trail running, mountain biking, rafting and orienteering, and in some cases caving, technical climbing, fixed line mountaineering and kayaking (Townes 2005). 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 adventure races are less than a day long with some only a few hours. As a result participation in adventure racing is exploding, and more and more trainers are encountering clients interested in the challenges of this domain.

Characteristics of Adventure Races

Course location and race structure are usually unique with competitors often being informed only days before or sometimes at the race itself of exactly what will happen. This can make it difficult to prepare specifically for any event. The fact that most races take place over several hours' means the physical demands can be high. Teams must reach a series of checkpoints and may need to cover large distances over sometimes-difficult terrain. Although very little data exists on conditioning for adventure racing, preliminary evidence indicates at advanced level, A racers are comparable to triathletes in levels of training required (Fordham, Garbutt & Lopez, 2004).

As one might expect, with increasing race distance, corresponding speed drops. An example from expedition racing demonstrates this, the 1994 Raid Gauloises in Borneo covered 350 miles in 4 1/2 days, the winning team achieved an average speed of 3.24 mph (Adamson 2004), this is probably a surprise to many.

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. Invariably it is the level of fitness or conditioning required however that plays most on the mind of a participant.

Physical Preparation for Adventure Racing

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 bodies' adaptation to training is specific to the training performed. 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 using the disciplines involved in your event - and second you then zero in on the specific characteristics/dynamics of your race as you progressively decrease the amount of general training you are performing. For a first time racer, it should be possible to prepare well over a six-month period, below offers a basic framework for how one might prepare a first time racer.

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 (Bompa 1999). Resistance training should emphasize whole body structural movements. such as deadlifts, squats, lunges, overhead pressing, rowing and carrying exercises. There are many variations of these movements, select those best suited to the individual, fitness level and event. The key is regular training that is steadily progressive, you should be looking to build from on a minimum 3 x p/week schedule, moving to 4 or 5 sessions over time, also consider splitting 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.

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. Even in the shortest races the ability to run/jog and cycle (mountain bike) for at least an hour is essential. Although useful as an early foundation, if you wish to be competitive, 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. Cardio-vascular training should now shift to outdoors and move toward a fartlek style approach. You must condition your body as best you can to tolerate higher levels of lactate and acidity in short bursts. Hill training using an interval approach is 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).* 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 your training should have a progressively increasing endurance focus, with resistance training dropping to 1-2 maintenance sessions per week as event approaches.

Summary

Adventure racing can provide a unique challenge of both our physical and cognitive skills. Attracting individuals and teams across all abilities, trainers are now being asked to help prepare clients for this new challenge. The physical demands can be high, this means that athletes must be well prepared and six months provides an adequate time period for a first racer. A balance of general and specific training is needed with specificity increasing as the event draws nearer, training frequency should build over time, and modes of training shift from indoor to outdoor environments as appropriate.

References and Recommended Reading

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